Local’s Artistic Director Pesha Rudnick chats with acclaimed author, academic, and lecturer Robin DiAngelo (White Fragility).

PESHA RUDNICK: Hello, Robin. Thank you so much for taking the time to talk today.

ROBIN DIANGELO: Sure. I was actually in Boulder not too long ago.

PR: When?

RD: A few months back, at Naropa. And I’m going to be back in Boulder in fall 2020 to do a three day intensive on white fragility.

PR: It’s exciting for us to be able to encourage people to read your book, White Fragility: Why It’s So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism for our LocalREADS program and let them know that you’re coming back next fall. Shall we dive in?

RD: Ok!

PR: Rodney Hicks turned us on to your book last spring when he was doing research for one of the characters in his play, Flame Broiled. or the ugly play. I read it over the summer and knew immediately that it would resonate with Boulder audiences. You define racism as encompassing economic, political, social and cultural structures, actions and beliefs that systemized and perpetuated an unequal distribution of privileges, resources, and power.

RD: Yes.

PR: Have you found yourself arguing about semantics around the word racism as you discuss your book? Does this hang people up?

RD: A little bit. So, first, the definition that you just read is a little dense and a little academic. The way I put it is that everyone has racial bias. But racism occurs when you back one group’s collective racial bias with legal authority and institutional control. It is transformed into a system because that bias is infused across the fabric of society.

(CONTINUED)
RD (continued): Those who are sitting at the table setting policies and practices that affect the lives of those who are not at the table are going to infuse their biases into their decisions in ways that benefit them, regardless of their intentions or their awareness. Sometimes I use a picture of an escalator. There are people on the escalator, and then there's a man who's sitting in a wheelchair at the base of the escalator. The people on the escalator are going about their day, they probably said good morning to this man as they passed him by. But just by virtue of the design of that escalator, he's excluded. Right?

Funny, I got an email yesterday from a white man suggesting terms other than racism. And I'm always thinking, “you think I've never heard that?” What really qualifies you to offer suggestions for new terms?

PR: Yeah. I wondered if people stop the conversation at the semantics so they don’t have to dive into the issue.

RD: I don't let them.

PR: Nice.

RD: I have some things going for me at this point. A lot of credibility and a captive audience. And I'm just not messing around anymore. I have a kind of confidence that I didn't used to have. I don't open the floor for those interruptions that function to take us down into the weeds. You know—pulling hairs over this definition so that we don't really get anywhere? There's a muscle that we need to develop, those of us who are white, and that is just holding and sitting with the discomfort of new and challenging information.

PR: Is it the same with white supremacy?

RD: Yes. Traditionally in the mainstream “white supremacy” describes people wearing white hoods—and the term does include that. But it is also a highly descriptive sociological term for the society we live in: one in which elevates white people as the human norm and ideal. And that message is circulating everywhere. White as superior.

PR: Sure.

RD: I use a combination of visuals. The image I use for white supremacy is the Sistine Chapel. With God creating man. Like, I just don't know that you can come up with a better image for white supremacy than a white God creating a white man.

(CONTINUED)
PR: Giant white man.

RD: Everybody has bias, but racism is what happens when you back one group’s bias with power. African-Americans are not and have never been in a position of power over the white collective in this country. So there’s no such thing as reverse racism. Sometimes when I make that point I say, “if you’re feeling resentment about this then ask yourself what that’s about?” I also use gender as a way in; I open with the example of women’s suffrage.

PR: It’s beautifully done in the book. I have to commend you.

RD: If I was a suffragette in 1918, I’d probably have some attitude. I’d probably be mean to some poor guy that I don’t even know and that would be biased. But could my group literally deny his civil rights? No. Could he deny mine? Yeah.

PR: And he did.

RD: Why? Because he has legal authority and institutional control and my group does not. And so we have to reserve language to capture that difference. Right now, this is the language we have; I’m not personally interested in coming up with new language. I’m interested in people deepening their understanding.

PR: My next question has to do with upward mobility. In your book, you mentioned that upward mobility takes us to whiter spaces in this country. Boulder is a white liberal mecca of upwardly mobile transplants. I’m generalizing, of course. But is there an inverse relationship between financial security and white fragility?

RD: Yeah, that’s a great question. I think the more isolated you are, the fewer sustained, authentic, cross-racial relationships you have, the more fragile you are likely to be when challenged. So the more racially isolated you are, the less you understand other people’s realities and the more you’re likely to project your own reality.

The most profound message of white supremacy is that there’s no loss in segregation for white people. That Boulder is wonderful, let’s be honest, in large part because it is white and because it is segregated. I bet people say things all the time like, “This is a safe area. This is a great place to raise kids.” Wow, what a message. White people measure the value of our spaces by the absence of people of color. I know exactly what a “good” school is and I know what a “bad” school is. I know what a “good” neighborhood is, and what is a “bad” neighborhood. I’m never going to say the N-word, but I have absorbed that message and it circulates 24/7.

(CONTINUED)
RD (continued): We have to change how we understand the messages of white supremacy. To talk about a place in glowing terms because it's white is a pretty powerful message. Segregation imposed on blacks in the Jim Crow South is terrible but White people choose segregation every day and speak about it in glowing terms.

PR: That’s interesting. I’m a fairly typical Boulderite who was raised in a very diverse community—Venice, California—and I am now living here.

RD: We almost always end up in whiter spaces, if we can afford it.

PR: Is that true?

RD: Isn’t it?

PR: Is that because of financial mobility? Talk to me about that.

RD: If you grew up lower class in Venice you probably lived in an apartment, right?

PR: I lived in a small house, but I shared a bedroom with two siblings.

RD: Ok, well the one exception to white segregation is urban, poor and working class. That’s the one group in the US that’s more likely to live in an integrated neighborhood. Well, we say integrated, but is it?

PR: There’s still segregation.

RD: Yes and if we’re going to improve our lives we move to whiter spaces. It just is the pattern. On some level we know that we live in a “bad” neighborhood in large part because it’s not segregated in terms of whiteness. I wrote an essay called “My Class Didn't Trump My Race: Using Oppression to Face Privilege.” I tell the story of growing up in poverty. You can find it on my website under “Other Publications”.

PR: Thank you.

RD: In the article I lay out how your original question, “Is Boulder likely to be more fragile than other places?” The answer is yes because you rarely ever have your racial reality challenged in places like Boulder. You develop little or no stamina for the discomfort of addressing racism and no real skills to navigate the conversation. Where would you get the skills? Where would you get the stamina? Quite honestly, where would you get the critical thinking? Right?

(CONTINUED)
PR: Well...

RD: The more important it is to our identities to be seen as progressive, the more vigorously we're going to defend our blind spots.

PR: I was bowled over by the section in the book where you describe white parents telling their children not to be racist. You say that the practice of our lives is the most powerful thing and to live a segregated life is the most powerful message of practice. Do you think children of color here are also the most vulnerable?

RD: Absolutely, right. One of the biggest learnings or “a-ha’s” for me last year was when I was working for a large tech company...

PR: Ok.

RD: In Austin, New York, San Francisco. We did these workshops and what really struck me was how dumbfounded the white people were at how much pain their colleagues of color were in. There's this idea that the younger generation is more progressive but they actually have very few skills to talk about racism. That's the result of the colorblind era. You know, “Everybody's the same. Everybody's equal. Look at all the crayons in the crayon box.” All that stuff. They just have no idea what the reality is and it means that their colleagues of color can't talk to them about what they're experiencing because they don't have any way to hold it. But I guess your original question was about our children.

PR: Yeah, if we are in practice of segregating our kids as we become upwardly mobile are we taking a potentially giant step backwards?

RD: Yes. And if you were raised in a poor area you know you will leave there. Most of us who grew up in those more diverse environments don't maintain any long term relationships. No one's encouraging us to do that, right? Think about it honestly. Do you have any ongoing relationships with any of those black kids you grew up with?

PR: Not from elementary school. I have Facebook relationships but not deep ongoing friendships. I don’t know why.

RD: Did you know that we are doing a young adult book version of white fragility?

PR: Oh, that’s wonderful. Although my nine year old and I have been listening to “White Fragility” on tape with and he's getting it on a deep level. Don’t go too soft on the material, because he gets it.

(CONTINUED)
RD: That's good to hear. The other thing you want to watch for is the way that white, middle and upper class parents consume diversity.

PR: Uh huh.

RD: We love the Montessori school, for example. We love schools that have children from international employees at these large tech companies that come to this country as upper class people. In the right doses; the right number from the right group; but what about the people of color in this country and from this country that grew up here? No way do we want our children going to school with them.

PR: Ours is an “international” charter school in Boulder.

RD: It seems a little disingenuous. There is a book called, “Raising White Children” by Jennifer Harvey that might be useful.

PR: Have you heard about the Race2Dinner events hosted by Regina Jackson and Saira Rao?

RD: Yes. Interestingly somebody just yesterday told me about them. Oh wait. Was that Nick from your office?

PR: Probably!

RD: I read that their telling the white women to get your s*** together and not cry. It was pretty blunt and direct. I figured, “Wow, well if you sign up for the dinner you know what you’re getting into.”

PR: “White Fragility” is required reading for the dinner. You can’t attend unless you read the book.

RD: That's good to know.

PR: I think your book does a powerful job at strengthening people—white women in particular. I suspect the Race2Dinner women agree.

RD: Well that's good.

PR: One last question?

ROBIN: Sure.

(CONTINUED)
PR: I've been curious about plantation tourism and monument preservation in the south. In the play, *Flame Broiled, or the ugly play* a family goes to a museum and is able to “choose” their tour. Have you heard about this phenomenon?

RD: I don't know if I've been following it per se but I have really strong feelings about plantations. I don't know how people can go on tours and look at their beauty and not see the image I have: this big beautiful house and this little white girl twirling around like a princess inside the house but the house is sitting on a hill of blood and bone. I could never go to a plantation and say, “let's enjoy the architecture.”

PR: Exactly! Like going to Monticello to see the gardens.

RD: I was in a southern city recently and we went on a tour of this large old house. The tour lady was talking and said, “The children ate here with the servants.”

PR: Oh gosh.

RD: And, “Don't you wish we still lived in that time, ha ha?” I was very upset and said, “First of all they were enslaved workers, they were not servants. And, no, I don't wish we still lived in that time.”

PR: Wow. You don't get to walk through Auschwitz for a tour of its architecture.

RD: Right! Exactly. So those are my thoughts about plantations and tourism. I know there are people who say they should be destroyed and I don’t think they should be. We need to face them for what they are.

It’s the same with the 4th of July. I mean what are we celebrating on the 4th of July? Independence? What was going on in this country in 1776 in terms of independence? It’s as if the white experience is the only experience.

PR: This year we were on a road trip with the kids on the 4th of July so we listen to a book on tape called *Chains* by Laurie Halse Anderson. Do you know it? It’s a retelling of the Fourth of July story from the perspective of an enslaved African-American child in New York City. It’s a very different way to teach American history.

RD: Do you know Ibram Kendi’s book, *Stamped From the Beginning*?

PR: I do.

(CONTINUED)
RD: It's a detailed history of racism in the US and they’re about to come out with a young adult version called *Stamped: Racism, Anti-Racism, and You*. People think, “Oh racism has always been around. People are just afraid of difference” but no. It's a very new idea and we need to understand how did it came to be.

PR: My husband and I were just talking about fear and racism. We know that fear is biological. So many well intended people simply say “Aren't we all just afraid of anything that is different than us?’

RD: Yeah but we make up what we’re afraid of. These are constructed ideas, so we can deconstruct them. We’ve been taught that it’s human nature. Okay, well, who’s more likely to say it's just human nature to dominate: those who are dominating or those who are being dominated? That’s the narrative of the dominator. It does appear that we have always dominated one another - that seems to be natural but so has resistance to domination. The need for justice is just as natural. I'm going with that side of the coin.

PR: Thank you so much, Robin. It’s been a pleasure to talk to you. I look forward to meeting you in person when you come back to Boulder next fall. I know some of our Local Theater Company audiences would love to take your workshop.

RD: Great.

PR: Thank you for your book. I’ll let you know how our LocalREADS conversation goes. Have a wonderful afternoon.

RD: You are so welcome. Bye bye!