

## The Antiracist Book Club Discussion Guide

Fall 2023 (Blocks 2 & 3)

*The Sum of Us: What Racism Costs Everyone and How We Can Prosper Together*

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This guide was prepared by me, Peony Fhagen, Full Professor, Associate Vice President for Institutional Equity & Belonging, and member of CC's ADEI leadership team.

Thank you for engaging with this thought-provoking book! I know that it will spark courageous conversations, deepen awareness and knowledge, and inspire action here at CC and in our communities beyond the campus. Here, I provide two different discussion guides.

I created the first set of discussion questions and an accompanying summary of each chapter. The second set of discussion questions comes directly from the discussion guide at the back of my copy of the book. I assume your copies include the questions too, but, just in case, I provide them in this guide.

Please use these varying discussion questions and my summaries in a way that best serves your book club.

### Chapter 1, An old story: the zero-sum hierarchy

McGhee locates the origin of the zero-sum paradigm in the history of slavery in the United States. She argues that the zero-sum paradigm motivates and rationalizes inequality in the US. The racial bargain, she argues, is no longer benefitting anyone, not even white Americans.

- How would you explain the relationship between racism and the zero-sum paradigm?
- What is a “zero-sum model of freedom built on slavery” (p. 12)?
- How and why has there been a recent resurgence of the zero-sum paradigm in U.S. politics?
- How does zero-sum thinking show up at Colorado College?

### Chapter 2, Racism drained the pool

McGhee identifies ways in which the zero-sum paradigm has been leveraged by politicians to rationalize the nation's divestment in public goods Using the poignant example of draining public pools in response to desegregation laws; she demonstrates how both white and black communities suffered the loss of a community meeting place and resource. McGhee writes:

A functioning society rests on a web of mutuality, a willingness among all involved to share enough with one another to accomplish what no one person can do alone. In a sense, that's what government is. I can't create my own electric grid, school system, internet, or healthcare system—and the most efficient way to ensure that those things are created and available to all on a fair and open basis is to fund and provide them publicly. (p. 21)

According to McGhee, public goods --the goods we share, resources available to all-- has been depleted because of racism and the zero-sum paradigm. She makes the point that public goods are “only for the public we perceive as good.” In this chapter she highlights the story of the demise of a public good -- massive public pools--which sets the stage for chapters to come on the depletion of other public goods.

- There are so many dimensions to the story of the drained pools that are fascinating and distressing. Which dimension of this example was most interesting to you and why?
- How does McGhee explain the following change: positive attitudes toward an “activist government in people’s economic lives” in the 1950s to current wide-spread anti-government sentiments?
- How have dog whistle politics been used to perpetuate racism, the zero-sum paradigm, and create a wedge between white people and people of color?
- What public goods have you benefited from and how?

### Chapter 3, Going without

In this chapter, McGhee builds on her public good analysis and highlights other public goods we are “going without” such as public higher education, hospitals, and health insurance. McGhee makes clear that the zero-sum game is hurting everyone regardless of their race, EXCEPT for the people who are economically very wealthy. However, she does point out that certain cultural groups are hurt more than others by the zero-sum game.

- Since the civil rights movement, there has been a steady increase in the participation of people of color in all aspects of political, civic, and economic endeavors across the nation. How and why has this expansion impacted the availability of public higher education?
- What is the “quiet crisis” going on in rural American and what is causing this crisis? Have you or people you know been negatively impacted by this quiet crisis? If so, how?
- Do you feel you experience “going without” because of racism and the zero-sum game? If so, how?

### Chapter 4, Ignoring the canary

For me this was the most disturbing of McGhee’s chapters because I was not familiar with the details of the predatory approaches of some of the largest household name banks in the United States. McGhee explains how greed fueled by zero-sum mentality supported individual, institutional, and structural levels of racism and caused the fiscal crisis of 2008. Further, McGhee masterfully helps the reader connect the dots between current predatory practices of banks that negatively impact the economic status of low- and middle-income white people, racist practices of the recent past that specifically targeted Black and Brown US citizens, redlining beginning in the 1950s, and the system of slavery.

- Do you think that another fiscal crisis like the one in 2008 could occur again and why?
- McGhee suggests that the predatory practices of banks were allowed to go on for so long because of psychological distancing. What are other examples of psychological

distancing which leads to the dehumanizing treatment of people that results in individual, structural, and systematic oppression? How does the zero-sum paradigm serve to amplify psychological distancing?

- McGhee ends her chapter alluding to the fact that dismantling racism and the zero-sum game begins with what we teach in our education systems—from grade school to graduate school. How can CC, as an institution, contribute to breaking the cycle of the zero-sum paradigm?

### Chapter 5, *No one fights alone*

In this chapter, McGhee illustrates how solidarity across racial and cultural lines can yield the economic dividends we need through a mechanism that is making a comeback in our society: unions. While the solidarity dividends of increased wages, better benefits, improved working conditions can result from unionizing, McGhee points out that the challenges of people collaborating abound (e.g., racial identity attitudes, racism, last place aversion, zero-sum mentality, and divide and conquer tactics). While naming these realities, McGhee also provides examples of people who surmounted these challenges to create critical change for so many workers. McGhee invites readers to shift from a winners and losers (zero-sum) approach to seeing ourselves as shareholders (solidarity dividends).

- A google search of unionizing in the news yields stories about graduate student workers, Walgreens pharmacy workers, Los Angeles city hall staffers, strippers in Hollywood, game makers, African workers for ChatGPT, TikTok, and Facebook, and the list goes on. In fact, as I make the final edits to this guide, the United Auto Workers union has gone on strike. Is this a sign that the era of inequality is finally ending? Why or why not?
- As I reread this chapter for a second time, I was struck by how hard it is for us as a nation to work together because the United States is made up of people from different racial and cultural backgrounds. For much of the existence of the United States, the people of this nation have been divided, fighting, avoiding being in last place, and oppressing each other. Moreover, creating and leveraging the zero-sum paradigm has been so easy because the United States is not monoracial and monocultural. In fact, as McGhee illustrates, we have just begun to develop the skills necessary to build coalitions, engage in collective action, and work in solidarity. Furthermore, we have just begun to recognize in mass that the zero-sum game approach is failing all of us. What are the skills we need to create solidarity dividends and why are they so challenging to cultivate?

### Chapter 6, *Never a real democracy*

Once again McGhee conveys truths, this time about our political system as it is rather than what we wish it to be. To read in detail about the rollback of progress that had been made in democratic representation since the 1965 Voting Rights Act is gut wrenching. The tactics used to suppress voters are many and a direct result of racism and the zero-sum mentality. The example of how Connecticut is ensuring representation in the state government and eradicating corruption is hopeful and provides a good model for how our democracy should be functioning politically.

- McGhee shares that her previous understanding of the US political system was based on miseducation in schools. Did you find yourself feeling bamboozled by what you were taught about the democratic system in the United States as you read this chapter? If so, can you remember some of the misleading information you learned?
- There is significant controversy over the benefits and drawbacks of the electoral system, particularly the Electoral College. Over the last week the Electoral College was in the news with one headline reading “Worried about Election Fraud: Protect the Electoral College.” while another headline read “Electoral College effectively disenfranchises most Americans.” In fact, since the Electoral College was implemented in 1787, there have been over 700 congressional proposals to revise or dismantle it. To what extent does the EC, implemented in 1787, operate using a zero-sum paradigm? What should it look like if we used a solidarity dividend paradigm?
- McGhee ends this chapter quoting a professor from Duke University, Nancy MacLean, who studies how opposition to democracy in the United States attempts to erode the current political system. Professor MacLean is optimistic that people who want a democratic nation can and will fight the opposition. Are you optimistic? Why or why not?

### Chapter 7, Living apart

According to McGhee, we are dealing with more than de facto segregation. In this chapter she sets out to demonstrate that the many ways we are segregated is more so due to de jure segregation: one public policy at a time. She also builds a case for how segregation is detrimental to us all using research on the economic impact, the environmental consequences, and the losses in educational settings (K-12). Finally, McGhee implicitly makes the key point that segregation in a multicultural society is abnormal. After all, we are not a monocultural/monoracial (homogenous) nation—never have been, never will be.

- McGhee suggests that “public policy created this problem, and public policy should solve it” (p. 177). Unlike her other chapters, McGhee provides limited examples of solutions to the segregation problem. What example does she provide? Can you think of other public policy approaches that have or could address this problem?
- Among the book club members, take a poll of which of you went to segregated schools and which of you went to integrated schools. Some of you, like McGhee, experienced both types of school settings. Reflect on your experiences with each other and how much this chapter illuminated or helped you better understand your schooling experiences.

### Chapter 8, The same sky

McGhee asks a critical question at the beginning of this chapter: Is climate change denial an identity issue? She then uses social psychology research, poll findings about climate change attitudes, and environmental racism and justice investigations to demonstrate that climate change denial, and a host of other policies impacting the environment, are related to white supremacy, racism, and zero-sum thinking. She also provides a compelling case study that illustrates once again the dividends of solidarity and collective action. This chapter is particularly relevant now,

given we have just experienced one of the hottest summers on record and some of the deadliest weather patterns in the world's history.

- Climate deniers who defend their stance claim a concern for the ramifications to the economy of environmentalism action. They also vehemently deny that their stance is related to racism/white supremacy/patriarchy. This is a classic case of a type of individual racism called “aversive racism”. Are there examples of aversive racism on our campus that make it difficult to make ADEI progress?
- It is easy to fall into the trap of doing campus work that addresses each of President Richardson’s lenses (antiracism, sustainability, and mental health/wellness) individually or one at a time. Does this chapter spark any ideas for how we can better address the intersection of these lenses on campus?
- Research on a social psychological construct, social dominance orientation, is highlighted in this chapter. As you discuss this chapter, I thought it would provide food for thought to have a social dominance orientation scale available to you, which can be found [here](#). Look at it and discuss the scale items to develop a better understanding of the construct and how McGhee discusses it in relation to climate denial.

### Chapter 9, The hidden wound

The cost of racism to white people, emotionally, spiritually, and cognitively, is the focus of this chapter. McGhee uses first account testimonials of people she interviewed during her travels across the United States to convey the ways that white people feel they have been psychologically wounded by racism. Because Robin DiAngelo’s concept of white fragility and her book about it are so well known, it was eye-opening to read her account of white supremacy socialization. McGhee ends the chapter with a critically important discussion about the relationship between religious doctrines and racism.

- This is McGhee’s most emotionally charged chapter. I imagine that for many of you, this chapter stirred a mix of feelings. Which part(s) of this chapter were most impactful and why?
- One point made by McGhee that I think is important to discuss in your book club is made at the very beginning of the chapter. She frames the cost of racism as a moral cost and that “we are all paying for the moral conflict of white Americans” (p.202). Discuss this point further and the implications for dismantling racism.
- In your opinion, currently, how pervasive is a colorblind worldview?
- In the previous chapter, McGhee discusses the concept of the social dominance worldview. In this chapter she discusses a colorblind worldview. In the next chapter, while not named explicitly, she further emphasized the benefits, or dividends, of a multicultural or polycultural worldview. Compare and contrast these worldviews and how they show up individually, interpersonally, organizationally, and structurally at Colorado College. (Not sure what all these worldviews mean? Do a quick google search of each and you will have definitions readily available.)

### Chapter 10, The solidarity dividend

McGhee ends her book with a focus on the strategy, she has been suggesting throughout the book, that will dismantle racism, zero-sum paradigm, and other forms of oppression and inequality. She begins the chapter with a case study that illustrates how solidarity, working together, and dealing healthily with difference can lead to the economic and social revival of a town and the dismantling of a racist local government. McGhee goes on to naming five discoveries she thinks will help us all prosper. She ends the chapter and her book with a suggestion—a national, collective process for engaging in truth, racial healing, and transformation activities.

- Discuss McGhee’s five discoveries in terms of feasibility, difficulty, realistic implementation, and anything else related to her prescription for solving the most perplexing social and economic problems that cause inequality.
- Allow yourself to imagine what a national process of truth, racial healing, and transformation would look like in the United States. Given the culture wars going on right now in the US I know this might be hard but try.
- Now that you have finished the book, what are three major takeaways that you predict will remain with you 6 months or 1 year from now.

**This ends my discussion guide. Below are the book’s discussion guide questions.**

- How do we create spaces that encourage solidarity, given that we often engage in cultural practices and support institutions that can reinforce a zero-sum mentality?
- Considering what you have recently learned, what would you want to tell your younger self about the history of the United States and why its social reality looks the way it does?
- How does McGhee’s background in economics influence her thinking about matters of race? How does she use her background to show us a new way into, and out of, a centuries-long problem?
- McGhee uses the example of public pools to illustrate how racism caused people to destroy something that could have benefitted all of us. What are other “pools” -- public goods that you see America going without –and how do you now think differently about the role racism might have played in this dynamic?
- Why would laborers like the white autoworkers McGhee describes refuse to unionize? How does this enhance your understanding of the “mystery” of people who vote against their own interests?
- Let us talk about the way “the drained pool” to use McGhee’s metaphor, has led to the student debt crisis—and how it is influencing generations of black and white college graduates.
- If you lived through the financial crisis and the Great Recession, what was your impression of the causes of the crash and the political debate afterward? How did reading chapter 4, “Ignoring the Canary” change your narrative about what happened?
- McGhee writes that white people are the most segregated people in America. What are some of the costs of continuing to segregate like this? What are the benefits of integration—both culturally *and* economically?

- McGhee coined the phrase “Solidarity Dividend” to describe Americans reaching across racial lines to work together for the common good—and securing better lives for all of us. Discuss some of the examples she shares where such solidarity has been achieved and offer others you have observed. If you have no real-life examples, what do you think impeded building in your community or institution?
- What is one thing you can do this week to work toward solidarity?
- After sharing a memory of a white classmate proudly stating that she is fiscally conservative and socially liberal, McGhee challenges the morality of advocating fiscal conservatism when we could afford to eliminate poverty. Do you agree or disagree with this?
- What are some ways white people can work to challenge zero-sum thinking?