

IEL's First Diversity and Inclusion Book Club—and Why It Matters

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On July 16, 2020, the Institute for Energy Law held its kickoff event for a newly formed Diversity & Inclusion (Virtual) Book Club. The Book Club—the product of a collaboration between IEL's Diversity & Inclusion and Member Engagement Committees—is especially timely given the growing conversation around what Dr. Sandra L. Shullman, President of the American Psychological Association, has referred to as the “racism pandemic”—a term that has been used by experts to describe a variety of phenomena, including overt racism and institutional or systemic racism, and the effects of these on historically disenfranchised racial groups. These are by no means new problems, but over the past few months, they have increasingly been brought to the forefront of the national conversation, particularly as the killings of Black individuals, like George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Rayshard Brooks, have ignited protests and demonstrations across the country and the world.

These demonstrations—and the conversations resulting from them—have had clear impacts on a number of companies, many of which have, over the past few months, issued statements expressing support for the Black Lives Matter movement, condemning the killings of George Floyd and others, and/or have vowed to take a serious look at their company cultures in an effort to address racial disparities within their organizations. In the energy industry specifically, leaders at Chevron, Shell, ExxonMobil, Duke Energy, and others have made statements, either to employees or to the general public, about their stances on racial discrimination and/or diversity and inclusion in response to the growing movement around these issues. But the real question is **how** companies and professional organizations can make good on these commitments.

The IEL Book Club arose as one potential answer to this question—and as a way to provide a space for IEL members to discuss diversity and inclusion issues through reading books that address these topics. And while book clubs are often not thought of as a feature of professional environments or organizations, the potential workplace benefits of fostering diversity and inclusion conversations through storytelling are well-documented. In a 2019 *Forbes* article entitled “10 Books to Help You Foster a More Diverse and Inclusive Workplace,” Dr. Janice Gassam Asare explained, “Education plays a pivotal role in the pursuit for a more diverse and inclusive workplace, and books can be a very effective and instrumental way to learn more about groups that are seemingly different from your own.” Indeed, studies have shown that reading narratives about other racial or cultural groups can reduce bias or prejudice towards that group. At the same time, book clubs like IEL's can provide a much-needed space for the voices and narratives of individuals often underrepresented in workplace or professional settings to take center stage.

In its July kickoff event, IEL's Book Club focused specifically on books addressing issues of racial diversity and inclusion, namely *Between the World and Me*, by Ta-Nehisi Coates, *White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk About Race*, by Dr. Robin

DiAngelo, *Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow*, by Leon Litwack, and *My Grandmother's Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies*, by Resmaa Menakem. Panelists, including Kimberly Phillips (General Counsel, Global Litigation, Shell Oil Company), Jennifer Reddien (Director of Diversity & Inclusion, Haynes and Boone, LLP), Nicole Soussan Caplan (Senior Associate, Reed Smith LLP), and Matt Jones (Shareholder, Liskow & Lewis), each gave a brief presentation on the book they chose to recommend to the larger group.

Through their presentations, each panelist shared how their respective books had changed their thinking on issues related to diversity and inclusion. Moderators then sparked conversation between panelists and participants by posing discussion questions on a range of topics, such as why it is important to understand the historical context of racial justice issues, and why notions of “colorblindness” (or statements such as, “I don’t see race”) can counteract efforts to promote racial inclusion. At the end of each presentation, participants completed a poll to rate their levels of interest in each book, with the goal of selecting the first book that the Book Club would discuss at their next meeting. The Book Club kickoff was well-attended and garnered a great deal of positive feedback from participants—in part based on the willingness of panelists to speak openly and honestly about how their own past experiences helped to inform their thinking on and commitment to diversity and inclusion-related issues.

Perhaps the most important takeaway from the event is that it is both valuable and possible to promote diversity and inclusion conversations in professional settings. Research shows that there a lot of reasons that companies or professional organizations shy away from conversations on diversity and inclusion issues, including ignorance or lack of education on diversity and inclusion topics, fear of saying “the wrong thing,” or anxiety about causing offense to others. Recognizing the potential for these fears to chill participation and conversation, IEL Book Club organizers set clear ground rules for the kickoff meeting—and for Book Club conversations going forward. These ground rules and principles, developed by Jennifer Reddien, Haynes and Boone, LLP’s Director of Diversity and Inclusion, were as follows:

- (1) This is a learning opportunity and therefore, please withhold judgment.**
- (2) Assume positive intent.**
- (3) Have a dialogue, not a debate.**
- (4) Share your perspectives.**
- (5) Challenge your own assumptions.**
- (6) Stay curious – ask questions.**
- (7) Confidentiality.**

The hope is that, by staying committed to these principles, IEL's Book Club will continue to be a productive avenue for IEL members to have the conversations necessary to ensure that a commitment to diversity and inclusion continues to be a priority within the energy industry.

For all IEL members interested in participating in the Diversity & Inclusion Book Club, participants read *Between the World and Me*, by Ta-Nehisi Coates for the second meeting and the third meeting (to be held in November) will be on *White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk About Race*, by Dr. Robin DiAngelo. Note that you need not have read the book to attend and participate. If you would like more information, please email vadams@cailaw.org.