

## The spectacle of antiracism

Daniela Silvestre Jorge Ayoub

University of Coimbra

Reni Eddo-Lodge, *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People About Race*, Bloomsbury 2017 (272 pages)

Robin DiAngelo, *White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism*, Beacon Press 2018 (192 pages)

### ABSTRACT

This review essay examines *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People About Race* (2017) by Reni Eddo-Lodge and *White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism* (2018) by Robin DiAngelo. These books are contextualized within a rich legacy of literature conceptualizing varying histories and manifestations of racism based on the documented experiences of people of colour. In *White Fragility*, DiAngelo recounts her role as a white educator and diversity consultant that regularly hosts trainings to talk to white people about race in the United States. Written in the tone of a workshop manual, the text centres around the notion of 'white fragility', a concept coined by the author to describe a uniform defensiveness that white people respond with when discussing racism and, in particular, when asked to confront their own implicit biases. In *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People About Race*, Eddo-Lodge chronicles her experience as a Black woman navigating mainly white spaces that trivialize the violent legacy of the British empire and disregard contemporary manifestations of structural racism. The author highlights the labour, exhaustion, gaslighting, and violence she faces in conversations about race with white people. In this review, I question how DiAngelo's concept of 'white fragility', contextualized within Eddo-Lodge's account of British colonialism and her personal experiences, can be understood as an ongoing strategy of whiteness rooted in the European colonial project. Furthermore, I consider how this application of the concept allows for the interrogation of *who* and *what* specific 'antiracism' efforts serve, and why it may be important to consider these elements in the context of the George Floyd uprisings and the Covid-19 pandemic.

### Keywords

white fragility, whiteness, colonialism, antiracism, multiculturalism

In different ways and to varying extents, *White Fragility* and *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People About Racism* can help frame our thinking about what this current moment requires. What is repeatedly highlighted by the authors is the role of the state as both the architect and the primary perpetrator of systematic damage, and the degree to which this permeates our collective existence. In both the United States and in the United Kingdom, the two geographical sites that the texts speak to, communities mythologized in the white imagination as innately "undesirable" or "dangerous" (DiAngelo 2018, 167-68) are disproportionality dying of or facing long-term health issues due to environmental and structural co-morbidities

that exasperate the risks and effects of Covid-19. American and British media, in the tradition of airing racist bigotry under the guise of free speech (Eddo-Lodge 2017, 195-96), have used data tracking community outbreaks to perpetuate the notion that people of colour are responsible for their own mortality due to poor individual decision-making. Yet, a careful analysis of the current moment unveils what writer Amiri Baraka refers to as “the changing same” (DiAngelo 2018, 22), in which perverse and normalized strategies of white supremacy, including extractivism, violence and death, are furthered in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic due to inescapable structures inherent to white supremacy.

Through DiAngelo’s role as a white ‘diversity trainer’ in the United States, *White Fragility* chronicles the hostile interactions she experiences in leading “primarily white audiences in discussions of race” (2018, 39). Recognizing the author’s background as a facilitator of diversity trainings geared to white audiences from a white perspective helps readers to understand the tone of the book, the position from which it is produced, the intended contribution it seeks to provide and to ultimately acknowledge its clear limitations. The book argues that, although white people do not think of themselves in racial terms, they organize themselves in solidarity with one another to reinforce an “unspoken agreement among whites to protect white advantage and not cause another white person to feel racial discomfort” (147). Any sign of discomfort often elicits a defensive response, which DiAngelo refers to as ‘white fragility’. The author argues that ‘white fragility’ is rooted in “the unexamined beliefs that prop up our racial responses” in order to maintain “the racial status quo” (41-42), hindering “cross-racial skill building” (47).

DiAngelo’s text asks white readers to look beyond illusions of the good/bad binary and instead to examine how socialization furthers structural racism and investment in white supremacy. The author explores the integral relationship between anti-blackness and the role of white saviourism in constructing narratives that portray Black people as inherent threats to their own and to others’ well-being. These initial chapters provide the foundation of DiAngelo’s central discussion of the concept to which the book is dedicated, ‘white fragility’. The author details how white people are ‘triggered’ to respond with ‘white fragility’ in efforts to “restore equilibrium” in reaction to the momentary loss of social capital (241). DiAngelo argues that this cycle of disequilibrium and restoration is so engrained through socialization that it distorts white people’s perception of danger, ultimately facilitating their ability to perpetrate harm and violence onto those that are the actual subjects of racial violence. The author ultimately encourages white people to engage in a self-led resocialization process to both recognize and interrupt their own (and each other’s) innate biases and racist behaviour.

Eddo-Lodge’s book, *Why I’m No Longer Talking to White People About Racism* (2017), is based on a blog post featured in the book’s preface. The blog post outlines the deep frustration that Eddo-Lodge experiences as a Black British woman over white people’s trivialization and outright denial of the legacy and manifestations of structural racism. Eddo-Lodge

highlights the labour, exhaustion, gaslighting, and perpetual fear of violence that she grapples with in discussing race in the United Kingdom. The blog post concludes with the author stating that, in response, she is setting a boundary to no longer talk to white people about race unless she “absolutely [has] to” (11). After circulation on social media, the blog post led to the publication of her book, in which she confronts the legacy of British imperialism and identifies contemporary expressions of white supremacy with the intention to provide the “political backdrop you need to anchor your opposition to racism” (18).

Inspired by the popular phrase: “We are here because you were there” (32), Eddo-Lodge awakes Britain’s colonial amnesia by highlighting how the British population came to be so diverse within the last 150 years: “We need to let it be known that black is British, that brown is British, and that we are not going away” (308-09). The book also explores racism within seemingly ‘progressive’ spaces. Namely, the author dedicates two chapters to discuss white feminism and to examine the relationship between race and class, unpacking common arguments from those who dismiss race as a factor of precarity. While the chapter on feminism provides the space to discuss intersectional feminism, the chapter on race and class highlights differentiations between perceptions and actualities that comprise class divisions, membership and racial makeup within British society. Importantly, the author discusses ways in which racial capitalism extracts cultural and social capital from communities it actively oppresses (269). Eddo-Lodge mainly aims to validate and legitimize her own experiences and those of other people of colour living in Britain, while contextualizing these experiences within a history of systemic ‘white fragility’. Ultimately, Eddo-Lodge highlights that the struggle of antiracism is one which rejects white heroism, urges the risk of potential marginalization, and refuses detached objectivity (305-7).

In what follows, I wish to question how DiAngelo’s concept of ‘white fragility’, contextualized both within Eddo-Lodge’s account of British colonialism and her personal experiences, can be understood as an ongoing strategy of whiteness rooted in the European colonial project. Furthermore, I consider how this application of the concept allows for the interrogation of *who* and *what* specific ‘antiracism’ efforts serve, and why it may be important to consider these elements in the context of the George Floyd uprisings and the Covid-19 pandemic.

DiAngelo’s brief discussion of the American settler-colonial project records the complexity and extensiveness of its history, noting in particular “the abduction and enslavement of African people, the displacement and genocide of Indigenous people, and the annexation of Mexican lands” (63). Fixated on the centuries of violence toward indigenous groups and enslaved people, DiAngelo’s description of American history renders the narratives of organized resistance and political imagination of oppressed people invisible and reveals roots of the liberal construction of antiracism.

Historian Vincent Brown recounts assemblies of 18th-century abolitionists around “the

image of a kneeling supplicant begging to be recognized as a man and a brother [... an] icon of abjection,” portraying the enslaved as submissive and, importantly, innocent (2020, 17-18). Brown argues that this vision of abjection continues to configure contemporary approaches to race (18). The failure to recognize the role of militant movements to pose viable threats to the European colonial project, leading to the formation of autonomous communities and the eventual abolition of slavery, reproduces harmful prerequisites for emancipation of any kind, namely submission and innocence. The shrouding of insurgencies within the nation’s history also removes the context to which ‘white fragility’ was born. Brown describes how exchanges between European colonists and militant Africans exposed colonialists’ “brittleness and insecurity”, in which the exercise of brutal violence was justified as a response to militancy (17): a manifestation of ‘white fragility’. The historical placement of ‘white fragility’ within the imperial project recognizes the implications of its expression as an inherited and long-existing strategy of whiteness.

The strategic utility of ‘white fragility’ as an organizing principle of imperial powers is evident in the numerous examples that Eddo-Lodge provides when recounting tactics employed to mitigate the presence of populations from Britain’s colonial peripheries. Driven by what journalist Charles Blow (2018) refers to as “white extinction anxiety,” Eddo-Lodge highlights ways in which the British state apparatus activates its institutions and generates policies to exercise systemic violence against people of colour in “fear of a black planet” (173). Eddo-Lodge explains the historical anxiety perpetuated in contemporary Britain, in which “the alienated ‘other’ will take over” (174). As a strategy of white supremacy, racist tropes evoking the impending threat that “the black man will have the whip hand over the white man” (173) are used to justify the continued subjugation of people of colour as a matter of self-preservation in a looming ‘majority-minority society’; a manifestation of ‘white fragility’ rooted in the ‘brittleness and insecurity’ expressed by European colonists. These measures are met with complacency in the British media, as “wishy-washy liberalism” is evoked in the commodification of racialized human beings to demonstrate how their potential value outweighs their presupposed inevitable burden (195).

Eddo-Lodge argues that in recognition of its own frailty, expressions and manifestations of white supremacy compulsively adapt in order to remain relevant (Eddo-Lodge 2017, 264). Examining the variety of contexts and methods in which ‘white fragility’ has been implemented as a strategy of force demonstrates its effective use in causing intergenerational emotional, psychological and physiological harm to people of colour. By examining the histories in which racism is practiced and the resistance movements relevant to specific struggles, we can better identify when white fragility is being implemented to further the political project of whiteness.

It is with this lens that I examine the “cross-racial skill building” (DiAngelo 2018, 47) that DiAngelo promotes in her confrontation with ‘white fragility’. As previously noted, DiAngelo bases the book’s claims on her own experience of leading activities, such as trainings and

workshops, to examine the white identity in a collective forum in efforts to ‘teach’ diversity. Complemented by a series of ‘diversity’ policies (e.g. quota systems), among other measures, these activities are often hosted by companies and corporations seeking to bring ‘racial awareness’ to their predominately white staff in efforts to increase and retain the presence of people of colour willing to perform assimilation within those spaces. While participant self-flagellation is encouraged, the author’s clients, such as multi-billion-dollar companies Amazon and Unilever, are not required to engage in transformative models of accountability, nor the recognition and repair of historical and current inequities. Instead, this corporate-led model becomes a superficial exercise intrinsic to multiculturalism, in which figures that actively do harm capitalize on the aesthetics of diversity and are, accordingly, granted praise for substituting the dismantling of whiteness by recognizing its existence.

This mainstreaming of ‘soft’ discussions on race impedes an understanding of whiteness as a political project that is constantly in the process of becoming (Yancy 2005, 9), amounting to a spectacle of anti-racism that reinforces the “axiological, political and material power of whiteness” as a political project (6). Based on what scholar Asad Haider (2017) refers to as an “ideology of racial hygiene,” this spectacle of anti-racism seeks to “eliminate undesirable elements from the white identity” by commodifying the aesthetics of diversity, while simultaneously inducing little, if any, change to the material realities produced through the nexus of “imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy” (hooks 2012, 4).

The promotion of this form of anti-racism work in imperial powers like the United States and the United Kingdom is a strategy of ‘white fragility’ intended to divorce the material implications of acknowledging histories of imperialism and assimilation from what the struggle of antiracism embodies: the collective struggle for freedom. Reducing the dismantling of whiteness to a set of formulas that can ‘fix’ or minimize the effects of structural racism recalls the imagery of abjection used by 18th-century abolitionists to appeal to the moral compass of those both exercising oppression and reaping the benefits from its longevity. There is no historical precedence exemplifying the compassion of oppressive groups in facilitating the liberation of the oppressed. Instead of encouraging the formation and expansion of transformative multiracial alliances that pose viable resistance to racial capitalism, these symbolic models of change offer greater investment in the structures that cause the greatest damage – a form of social stratification akin to the rigidity of caste systems (Wilkerson 2020). Instead of “condemning the state’s capacity to act like a god and destroy people’s lives, we try to mitigate the damage,” scholar Joy James states in a 2019 lecture at Brown University, this is what “works to facilitate admission to a cage, so that we can do some good deeds as opposed to dismantling the cage.”

The rich discussions featured in *Why I’m No Longer Talking to White People About Race* provide a foundation to explore DiAngelo’s concept of ‘white fragility’ as a historically situated

strategy of white supremacy. This approach challenges ways in which popular antiracism exercises, such as diversity trainings, facilitate the normalization of ‘soft’ discussions on race through an elusive spectacle of antiracism, failing to pose any viable threat to the structures and ideology of white supremacy. The uprisings following the murder of George Floyd demonstrate how the spectacle of antiracism rewards docile calls for change, while demonizing individuals and movements which seek to transform the structures of power, further highlighting “the dialectic that [exists] between white supremacy and Black degradation” (Yancy 2005, 4).

It is this precise dynamic that Eddo-Lodge poignantly describes, by highlighting the systemic violence that people of colour have historically faced in the United Kingdom and the ways in which organized resistance has been and continues to be challenged by employing violent strategies rooted in ‘white fragility’. This same dynamic points to the inadequacy of diversity trainings and other expressions of multiculturalism to contest the profound emotional, psychological and physiological effects of white supremacy and, thus, reveal the significant limitations inherent to DiAngelo’s *White Fragility*.

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**Daniela Silvestre Jorge Ayoub** is a PhD candidate in Human Rights in Contemporary Societies at CES (Centre for Social Studies)/the Institute for Interdisciplinary Research of the University of Coimbra. She holds a BA in Political Science (William Paterson University, USA), an MA in Responsible Management (Steinbeis University, Germany) and an MSc. in Development and International Relations (Aalborg University, Denmark). Her research interests include securitization, surveillance, biopolitics, neocolonialism and criminology. [danielaayoub@ces.uc.pt](mailto:danielaayoub@ces.uc.pt)