

# On “White Fragility”: A few thoughts on America’s smash-hit #1 guide to egghead racialism

Written by Matt Taibbi, published on June 28, 2020

A core principle of the academic movement that shot through elite schools in America since the early nineties was the view that individual rights, humanism, and the democratic process are all just stalking-horses for white supremacy. The concept, as articulated in books like former corporate consultant Robin DiAngelo’s *White Fragility* (Amazon’s [#1 seller](#)!) reduces everything, even the smallest and most innocent human interactions, to racial power contests.

It’s been mind-boggling to watch *White Fragility* celebrated in recent weeks. When it surged past a *Hunger Games* book on bestseller lists, *USA Today* [cheered](#), “American readers are more interested in combatting racism than in literary escapism.” When DiAngelo appeared on *The Tonight Show*, Jimmy Fallon [gushed](#), “I know... everyone wants to talk to you right now!” *White Fragility* has been pitched as an uncontroversial road-map for fighting racism, at a time when after the murder of George Floyd Americans are suddenly (and appropriately) interested in doing just that. Except this isn’t a straightforward book about examining one’s own prejudices. Have the people hyping this impressively crazy book actually read it?

DiAngelo isn’t the first person to make a buck pushing tricked-up pseudo-intellectual horseshit as corporate wisdom, but she might be the first to do it selling Hitlerian race theory. *White Fragility* has a simple message: there is no such thing as a universal human experience, and we are defined not by our individual personalities or moral choices, but only by our racial category.

If your category is “white,” bad news: you have no identity apart from your participation in white supremacy (“Anti-blackness is foundational to our very identities... Whiteness has always been predicated on blackness”), which naturally means “a positive white identity is an impossible goal.”

DiAngelo instructs us there is nothing to be done here, except “strive to be less white.” To deny this theory, or to have the effrontery to sneak away from the tedium of DiAngelo’s lecturing – what she describes as “leaving the stress-inducing situation” – is to affirm her conception of white supremacy. This intellectual equivalent of the “ordeal by water” (if you float, you’re a witch) is orthodoxy across much of academia.

DiAngelo’s writing style is pure pain. The lexicon favored by intersectional theorists of this type is built around the same principles as Orwell’s *Newspeak*: it banishes ambiguity, nuance, and feeling and structures itself around sterile word pairs, like *racist* and *antiracist*, *platform* and *deplatform*, *center* and *silence*, that reduce all thinking to a series of binary choices. Ironically, Donald Trump does something similar, only with words like “[AMAZING!](#)” and “[SAD!](#)” that are simultaneously more childish and livelier.

Writers like DiAngelo like to make ugly verbs out of ugly nouns and ugly nouns out of ugly verbs (there are countless permutations on *centering* and *privileging* alone). In a world where only a few ideas are considered important, redundancy is encouraged, e.g. “To be less white is to break with white silence and white solidarity, to stop privileging the comfort of white people,” or “Ruth Frankenberg, a premier white scholar in the field of whiteness, describes whiteness as multidimensional...”

DiAngelo writes like a person who was put in timeout as a child for speaking clearly. “When there is disequilibrium in the habitus — when social cues are unfamiliar and/or when they challenge our capital — we use strategies to regain our balance,” she says (“People taken out of their comfort zones find ways to deal,” according to Google Translate). Ideas that go through the English-DiAngelo translator usually end up significantly altered, as in this key part of the book when she addresses Dr. Martin Luther King’s “I have a dream,” speech:

One line of King’s speech in particular—that one day he might be judged by the content of his character and not the color of his skin—was seized upon by the white public because the words were seen to provide a simple and immediate solution to racial tensions: pretend that we don’t see race, and racism will end. Color blindness was now promoted as the remedy for racism, with white people insisting that they didn’t see race or, if they did, that it had no meaning to them.

That this speech was held up as the framework for American race relations for more than half a century precisely because people of all races understood King to be referring to a difficult and beautiful long-term goal worth pursuing is discounted, of course. *White Fragility* is based upon the idea that human beings are incapable of judging each other by the content of their character, and if people of different races think they are getting along or even loving one another, they probably need immediate antiracism training. This is an important passage because rejection of King's "dream" of racial harmony — not even as a description of the obviously flawed present, but as the aspirational goal of a better future — has become a central tenet of this brand of antiracist doctrine mainstream press outlets are rushing to embrace.

The book's most amazing passage concerns the story of Jackie Robinson:

The story of Jackie Robinson is a classic example of how whiteness obscures racism by rendering whites, white privilege, and racist institutions invisible. Robinson is often celebrated as the first African American to break the color line...

While Robinson was certainly an amazing baseball player, this story line depicts him as racially special, a black man who broke the color line himself. The subtext is that Robinson finally had what it took to play with whites, as if no black athlete before him was strong enough to compete at that level. Imagine if instead, the story went something like this: "Jackie Robinson, the first black man whites allowed to play major-league baseball."

There is not a single baseball fan anywhere – literally not one, except perhaps Robin DiAngelo, I guess – who believes Jackie Robinson broke the color barrier because he "finally had what it took to play with whites." Everyone familiar with this story understands that Robinson had to be exceptional, both as a player and as a human being, to confront the racist institution known as Major League Baseball. His story has always been understood as a complex, long-developing political tale about overcoming violent systemic oppression. For DiAngelo to suggest history should re-cast Robinson as "the first black man whites allowed to play major league baseball" is grotesque and profoundly belittling.

Robinson's story moreover did not render "whites, white privilege, and racist institutions invisible." It did the opposite. Robinson uncovered a generation of job inflation for mediocre Taibbi, Matt (2020): On "White Fragility": A few thoughts on America's smash-hit #1 guide to egghead racialism, Onlineartikel vom 28. Juni 2020, abrufbar unter: <https://taibbi.substack.com/p/on-white-fragility>, Zugriff am 12.07.2020.

white ballplayers in a dramatic example of “privilege” that was keenly understood by baseball fans of all races fifty years before *White Fragility*. Baseball statistics nerds have long been arguing about whether to put [asterisks](#) next to the records of white stars who never had to pitch to Josh Gibson, or hit against prime Satchel Paige or Webster McDonald. Robinson’s story, on every level, exposed and evangelized the truth about the very forces DiAngelo argues it rendered “invisible.”

It takes a special kind of ignorant for an author to choose an example that illustrates the mathematical opposite of one’s intended point, but this isn’t uncommon in *White Fragility*, which may be the dumbest book ever written. It makes *The Art of the Deal* read like *Anna Karenina*.

Yet these ideas are taking America by storm. The movement that calls itself “antiracism” – I think it deserves that name a lot less than “pro-lifers” deserve theirs and am amazed journalists parrot it without question – is complete in its pessimism about race relations. It sees the human being as locked into one of three categories: members of oppressed groups, allies, and white oppressors.

Where we reside on the spectrum of righteousness is, they say, almost entirely determined by birth, a view probably shared by a lot of *4chan* readers. With a full commitment to the program of psychological ablutions outlined in the book, one may strive for a “less white identity,” but again, DiAngelo explicitly rejects the Kingian goal of just trying to love one another as impossible, for two people born with different skin colors.

This dingbat racist cult, which has no art, music, literature, and certainly no comedy, is the vision of “progress” institutional America has chosen to endorse in the Trump era. Why? Maybe because it fits. It won’t hurt the business model of the news media, which for decades now has been monetizing division and has known how to profit from moral panics and witch hunts since before Fleet street discovered the Mod/Rocker wars.

Democratic Party leaders, pioneers of the costless gesture, have already embraced this performative race politics as a useful tool for disciplining apostates like Bernie Sanders. Bernie took off in presidential politics as a hard-charging crusader against a Wall Street-fattened political establishment, and exited four years later a self-flagellating, defeated old white man Taibbi, Matt (2020): On “White Fragility”: A few thoughts on America’s smash-hit #1 guide to egghead racialism, Onlineartikel vom 28. Juni 2020, abrufbar unter: <https://taibbi.substack.com/p/on-white-fragility>, Zugriff am 12.07.2020.

who seemed to regret not apologizing more for his third house. Clad in kente cloth scarves, the Democrats who crushed him will burn up CSPAN with homilies on privilege even as they reassure donors they'll stay away from Medicare for All or the carried interest tax break.

For corporate America the calculation is simple. What's easier, giving up business models based on war, slave labor, and regulatory arbitrage, or benching Aunt Jemima? There's a deal to be made here, greased by the fact that the "antiracism" prophets promoted in books like *White Fragility* share corporate America's instinctive hostility to privacy, individual rights, freedom of speech, etc.

Corporate America doubtless views the current protest movement as something that can be addressed as an H.R. matter, among other things by hiring thousands of DiAngelos to institute codes for the proper mode of Black-white workplace interaction.

If you're wondering what that might look like, here's DiAngelo explaining how she handled the fallout from making a bad joke while she was "facilitating antiracism training" at the office of one of her clients.

When one employee responds negatively to the training, DiAngelo quips the person must have been put off by one of her Black female team members: "The white people," she says, "were scared by Deborah's hair." (White priests of antiracism like DiAngelo seem universally to be more awkward and clueless around minorities than your average Trump-supporting construction worker).

DiAngelo doesn't grasp the joke flopped and has to be told two days later that one of her web developer clients was offended. In despair, she writes, "I seek out a friend who is white and has a solid understanding of cross-racial dynamics."

After DiAngelo confesses her feelings of embarrassment, shame and guilt to the enlightened white cross-racial dynamics expert (everyone should have such a person on speed-dial), she approaches the offended web developer. She asks, "Would you be willing to grant me the opportunity to repair the racism I perpetrated toward you in that meeting?" At which point the web developer agrees, leading to a conversation establishing the parameters of problematic joke resolution.

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This dialogue [straight out of \*South Park\*](#) – “Is it okay if I touch your penis? No, you may not touch my penis at this time!” – has a good shot of becoming standard at every transnational corporation, law firm, university, newsroom, etc.

Of course the upside such consultants can offer is an important one. Under pressure from people like this, companies might address long-overdue inequities in boardroom diversity.

The downside, which we’re already seeing, is that organizations everywhere will embrace powerful new tools for solving professional disputes, through a never-ending purge. One of the central tenets of DiAngelo’s book (and others like it) is that racism cannot be eradicated and can only be managed through constant, “lifelong” vigilance, much like the [battle with addiction](#). A useful theory, if your business is selling teams of high-priced toxicity-hunters to corporations as next-generation versions of efficiency experts — in the fight against this disease, companies will need the help forever and ever.

Cancellations already are happening too fast to track. In a phenomenon that will be familiar to students of Russian history, accusers are beginning to appear alongside the accused. Three years ago a popular Canadian writer named [Hal Niedzviecki](#) was [denounced](#) for expressing the opinion that “anyone, anywhere, should be encouraged to imagine other peoples, other cultures, other identities.” He reportedly was forced out of the Writer’s Union of Canada for the crime of “cultural appropriation,” and denounced as a racist by many, including a poet named Gwen Benaway. The latter said Niedzviecki “doesn’t see the humanity of indigenous peoples.” Last week, Benaway herself was [denounced on Twitter](#) for failing to provide proof that she was Indigenous.

Michael Korenberg, the chair of the board at the University of British Columbia, was [forced to resign](#) for liking tweets by Dinesh D’Souza and Donald Trump, which you might think is fine – but what about Latino electrical worker [Emmanuel Cafferty, fired](#) after a white activist took a photo of him making an OK symbol (it was described online as a “white power” sign)? How about Sue Schafer, the heretofore unknown graphic designer the [Washington Post decided to out](#) in a 3000-word article for attending a Halloween party two years ago in blackface (a failed parody of a *different* blackface incident involving Megyn Kelly)? She was fired, of course. How was this news? Why was ruining this person’s life necessary?

People everywhere today are being encouraged to snitch out schoolmates, parents, and colleagues for thoughtcrime. The *New York Times* wrote [a salutary piece](#) about high schoolers scanning social media accounts of peers for evidence of “anti-black racism” to make public, because what can go wrong with encouraging teenagers to start submarining each other’s careers before they’ve even finished growing?

“People who go to college end up becoming racist lawyers and doctors. I don’t want people like that to keep getting jobs,” one 16 year-old said. “Someone rly started a Google doc of racists and their info for us to ruin their lives... I love twitter,” [wrote](#) a different person, adding cheery emojis.

A bizarre echo of North Korea’s “[three generations of punishment](#)” doctrine could be seen in the [boycotts of Holy Land grocery](#), a well-known hummus maker in Minneapolis. In recent weeks it’s been abandoned by clients and seen [its lease pulled](#) because of racist tweets made by the CEO’s 14 year-old daughter *eight years ago*.

Parents calling out their kids is also in vogue. In *Slate*, “Making a Mountain Out of a Molehill” wrote to advice columnist Michelle Herman in a letter headlined, “[I think I’ve screwed up the way my kids think about race](#).” The problem, the aggrieved parent noted, was that his/her sons had gone to a diverse school, and their “closest friends are still a mix of black, Hispanic, and white kids,” which to them was natural. The parent worried when one son was asked to fill out an application for a potential college roommate and expressed annoyance at having to specify race, because “I don’t care about race.”

Clearly, a situation needing fixing! The parent asked if someone who didn’t care about race was “just as racist as someone who only has white friends” and asked if it was “too late” to do anything. No fear, Herman wrote: it’s never too late for kids like yours to educate themselves. To help, she linked to a program of materials designed for just that purpose, a “[Lesson Plan for Being An Ally](#),” that included a month of readings of... *White Fragility*. Hopefully that kid with the Black and Hispanic friends can be cured!

This notion that color-blindness is itself racist, one of the main themes of *White Fragility*, could have amazing consequences. In researching *I Can’t Breathe*, I met civil rights activists who recounted decades of struggle to remove race from the law. I heard stories of lawyers who were Taibbi, Matt (2020): On “White Fragility”: A few thoughts on America’s smash-hit #1 guide to egghead racialism, Onlineartikel vom 28. Juni 2020, abrufbar unter: <https://taibbi.substack.com/p/on-white-fragility>, Zugriff am 12.07.2020.

physically threatened for years in places like rural Arkansas just for trying to end explicit hiring and housing discrimination and other remnants of Jim Crow. Last week, an Oregon County casually [exempted](#) “people of color who have heightened concerns about racial profiling” from a Covid-19 related mask order. Who thinks creating different laws for different racial categories is going to end well? When has it ever?

At a time of catastrophe and national despair, when conservative nationalism is on the rise and violent confrontation on the streets is becoming commonplace, it’s extremely suspicious that the books politicians, the press, university administrators, and corporate consultants alike are asking us to read are urging us to put race even more at the center of our identities, and fetishize the unbridgeable nature of our differences. Meanwhile books like *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *To Kill a Mockingbird*, which are both beautiful and actually anti-racist, have been banned, for [containing the “N-word.”](#) (*White Fragility* contains it too, by the way). It’s almost like someone thinks there’s a benefit to keeping people divided.

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