

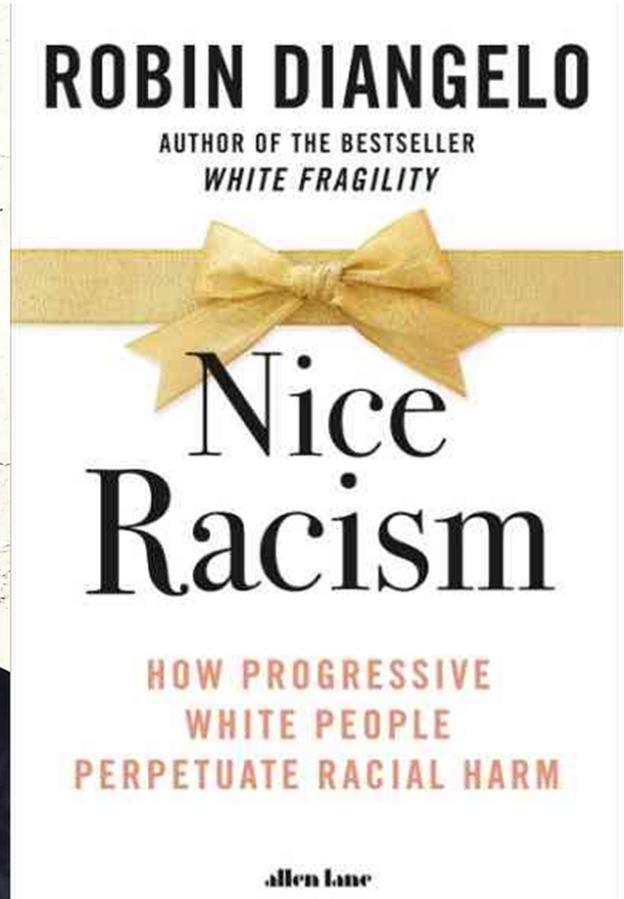


THE ARC DIGI REVIEW OF BOOKS

# Petty Antiracism

A review of Robin DiAngelo's "Nice Racism: How Progressive White People Perpetuate Racial Harm"

🔒 Jeffrey Aaron Snyder Jul 9 ❤️ 6 📄



*Nice Racism*  
Robin DiAngelo  
Beacon Press, 224 pages, 2021

“White progressives cause the most daily harm to Black, Indigenous, and other racialized people.” This is the thesis of Robin DiAngelo’s new book *Nice Racism*, which is a sequel to her 2018 runaway bestseller *White Fragility*.

If this sounds like an absurd claim, you're right. Unless you believe that microaggressions committed by well-meaning white people in diversity training sessions, yoga studios, and organic food co-ops are inflicting more damage on people of color than, among other people, predatory lenders and landlords, corrections officers, and Republican legislators hell-bent on cutting food stamps and Medicaid.

The racism of progressive white people, DiAngelo contends, is characterized by "racial insensitivity, ignorance, and arrogance" rather than the blatant racism of racial epithets and Confederate flags. That doesn't make it any less pernicious, according to DiAngelo. Here are some of the examples of "nice racism" she cites: "equating your experience as a white immigrant or the child of white immigrants to the experiences of African Americans"; "gossiping about the racism of other white people to BIPOC people to distinguish yourself as the good white person"; "loving and recommending films about racism that feature white saviors"; and "claiming to have a friendship with a Black colleague who has never been to your home."

"Those of us who are actively engaged in racial justice work," DiAngelo says, "have many opportunities to cause racial harm and to inflict that harm more efficiently." She offers an example of a white fragility workshop she conducted with a majority BIPOC group that continues to torment her. From what I could gather, DiAngelo didn't pitch the material at the right level and she failed to engage her audience effectively. She also asked a person of color to hold his question until she was done with her presentation. In DiAngelo's mind, the workshop was nothing short of an unmitigated disaster: "I silenced their questions, I insulted their expertise and I subjected them to white domination." "I am a nice white progressive with years of experience who knows better," she writes ruefully, "and I caused this harm in two short hours."

An utter lack of perspective and proportionality is endemic to the Antiracism, Inc. enterprise of DiAngelo and Ibram X. Kendi. I am reminded of a recent antiracism training session I attended where a white trainer was asked how his internalized white supremacy contributed to the oppression or subjugation of people of color. Here's how he responded:

I commit microaggressions constantly. I run meetings where I tend to pay more attention to white contributors, make greater eye contact with my white colleagues than my BIPOC colleagues. It's a constant daily process of trying to understand my learned white supremacy. I'm struggling and often failing.

Three quick observations: First, it's noteworthy that the trainer seems to believe that failing to make eye contact with his BIPOC colleagues is a clear and obvious manifestation of white supremacy. Second, with years of experience as a diversity trainer under his belt, why is he still struggling to pay attention to people of color during professional meetings? And third, why would an institution hire a trainer who has made so little progress in his own purported field of expertise?

Like many people who ritualistically invoke “white supremacy” as a catch-all explanation for racial inequalities, DiAngelo lives in a fantasy world where there has been no genuine racial progress within living memory. In her estimation, racial “fears, bias and resentments” have not changed significantly since the 1950s. The less said about this egregiously misguided point-of-view the better, but I can't refrain from mentioning the remarkable shifts in behavior and attitudes with respect to one of the most explosive of all white racial anxieties, namely interracial marriage or “miscegenation” in the lingo of yesterday's bigots. Interracial marriage was illegal in 16 states until 1967 when the Supreme Court outlawed anti-miscegenation statutes in the landmark case of *Loving v. Virginia*. That same year, only 3 percent of newlywed couples were intermarried. In 2015, this figure was 17 percent, or more than one in six newlyweds. As recently as 1990, 63 percent of non-Black Americans said “they would be very or somewhat opposed to a close relative marrying a Black person.” In 2016, this number had plummeted to 14 percent.



Rarely have I seen an “expert” consultant insult her audience and clientele with more gusto than DiAngelo. Indeed a more accurate title for *Nice Racism* would be something like *The Work: You're Not Doing it Right, Damnit!* DiAngelo castigates the people attending her workshops, trainings, and lectures as posers who expect to be “validated in their wokeness, not called in and exposed.” Far too many white antiracists, according to DiAngelo, are more than happy to acknowledge the existence of racism but they “locate it in any white person other than themselves.”

White progressives with marginalized identities are allegedly the most susceptible to the white fragility trap, often becoming “defensive and resistant” when challenged on their racism. Playing “the victim,” DiAngelo says, in terms of dwelling on one’s class, gender, sexual orientation, disability status, etc. is a dangerous distraction, a sly means of “changing the channel to another form of oppression whenever race comes up.”

DiAngelo devotes an unseemly amount of attention in *Nice Racism* to petty and clumsy score-settling. Critiques about her expertise and qualifications have clearly gotten under her skin. (Why else would she repeatedly tout her credentials as an in-demand, “internationally recognized academic”?) On a London cabbie who challenged her notion of white fragility, DiAngelo sniffs: “he had the author of a *New York Times* best-selling book who was in town to do interviews for the BBC in his cab, and he did not ask a single question about my thoughts on the matter.” She devotes six pages to dissecting a critical email from an NPR listener who objected to several claims she made in a Weekend Edition interview, ultimately concluding that “the writer is a white man chastising a white woman with more knowledge of the matter than he has.” She also makes a hash of presenting and responding to an insightful critique of her work from John McWhorter, pausing to awkwardly note that “he is not white or a progressive.”

DiAngelo is incredulous that white people (*progressive* white people, no less!) can respond so negatively to her antiracist interventions. She reports that it’s common for people to walk out in the middle of her workshops in frustration. After one such instance, when Bob and Sue make for the exits, she writes: “I was left wondering, yet again, what happens cognitively for so many white people in anti-racism education efforts that prevents them from actually hearing what is being presented.” There is no recognition of the possibility that the message or messenger might be flawed.

DiAngelo inadvertently illuminates the hubris at the heart of the Antiracism, Inc. enterprise when she makes the following observation: “In conservative Christian communities, people who challenge authority are often told to pray harder.” This try-harder rejoinder to any critique of antiracism is invoked like a sacred mantra among the diversity consultant set. I can only marvel at the brilliance of this move from a marketing perspective. When the concept of white fragility is taken as axiomatic, DEI consultants will interpret every critique of their trainings as a sign that more training

is needed. It's like peddling an ineffective drug and telling patients they just need to up the dose whenever they have a complaint.

This maneuver relates to a trademark of Antiracism, Inc., which is the frequent reminder that different people will come to training sessions with different levels of understanding. This notion is invariably invoked whenever there is confusion, resistance or conflict. There is no recognition that people, including those who are smart and well-informed, might actually hold different views about the nature of racism and the wisest policies to promote racial justice.



DiAngelo's narcissism is so expansive that the descriptions of her ongoing racial journey frequently devolve into parody. On how she is ashamed about not feeling enough racial shame on a daily basis, she writes:

Perhaps on my way into Whole Foods I must walk past an Indigenous man who appears homeless lying on the sidewalk. I see him from down the block and in that moment I become hyper-conscious of our racial positions. My whiteness suddenly feels very "loud," and I "know" that he knows that I am an imposter and a hypocrite, that my privilege and comfort, my access to resources, are dependent on his position in relation to mine, dependent on his oppression. I feel anxious about having to walk past him, dreading the encounter. For the duration of the approximately two minutes that it takes for me to traverse that sidewalk, I feel racial shame.

This scenario is all about how an "encounter" with a homeless man makes *DiAngelo* feel. There is no empathy for the man's predicament, no interest in engaging him or offering him any kind of assistance. He is merely a prop in DiAngelo's personal antiracist melodrama.

When DiAngelo describes what it takes to be an antiracist, it sounds to me like she's describing life inside a cult:

An anti-racist lens should also be operating continuously, transforming who is in my life, who I connect with, what I see, what I care about, what I talk about, what I

read about, what I buy, how I work, what I am willing to feel, what I can bear witness to, what discomfort I can withstand and what risks I am willing to take.

If you're counting, there are 11 "I" statements in this single sentence. In response to the critics who charge DiAngelo with paying too much attention to antiracism as an individual project, she replies that "structural transformation" is impossible without "personal transformation." But she never spells out *how* doing "the work" as an individual will lead to meaningful collective action or social change. All she can offer is a kind of antiracism to-do list that includes tasks such as: giving credit to the work of BIPOC people who have shaped your thinking, breaking "white silence on racism" in your workplace, social circle, and place of worship, joining racial justice organizations, participating in white affinity groups, and finding an "accountability partner."

DiAngelo sees these last two suggestions as particularly important. She defines white affinity groups as places for white people to "keep racism on their radar" and to work through their "racist socialization" by "consciousness-raising, healing and ongoing skill building." Racial affinity groups, DiAngelo says, have the additional benefit of shielding people of color from the harmful comments that white people will inevitably make.

Affinity groups like these are increasingly in vogue in DEI initiatives and trainings across the country. One imagines an endless cycle of meetings, with white folks "interrogating" their whiteness, "checking their privilege," lamenting "their complicity" in racism and pledging to "do better." Combining group therapy with struggle sessions, white affinity groups provide a platform to discuss questions like whether "white supremacy may also be what is in our 'true hearts.'"

I have a hard time believing that white affinity groups will move the needle on racial inequality. Consider attempting to address economic inequality through similar means. In the 1 percent affinity group, CEOs, hedge fund managers, Silicon Valley tycoons, and other obscenely wealthy professionals would wrestle with their financial privilege and do their darndest to try and better understand what it's like to live in poverty. Food for thought the next time they have a long flight on their private jets.

Aha, DiAngelo might say. That's why all white people need an accountability partner. As DiAngelo explains, an accountability partner is a person of color "with whom you have built a trusting relationship and who has agreed to coach you, talk through challenges with you, think with you and challenge you on issues of racism." Whether a colleague or a friend, accountability partners "should be paid for their time." Yes, you read that right. "We need," DiAngelo insists, "to start seeing the intellectual and emotional labor that racialized people do to navigate and survive in white supremacist societies as labor that needs to be compensated."

If paying your BIPOC friends to make sure that your antiracist journey staying on track is not the ultimate expression of tokenism, I don't know what is. As if there are legions of people of color who would be willing and able to help their white friends wage their personal battles with racism, while billing them by the hour.



DiAngelo has two useful things to say in *White Fragility* and *Nice Racism*: white people share a racial identity, and a lot of white people are reluctant to talk about racism. The rest is self-righteous, navel-gazing claptrap. The two points above, of course, have been made before and articulated much more effectively by other people. In a five-page essay called "On Being 'White' ... And Other Lies," James Baldwin expresses these ideas with more precision, eloquence, and depth than DiAngelo can muster in several hundred pages. (If you crave a more comprehensive account of "whiteness," read Nell Irvin Painter's tour-de-force *The History of White People*.)

DiAngelo is only worth reading because her approach to antiracism is so popular. After Kendi, she is arguably the most influential voice shaping the content and tenor of the rapidly proliferating antiracism initiatives that have taken hold in K-12 schools, colleges, universities, nonprofits, and corporations. That DiAngelo has such a prominent position in today's national conversation around race is unfortunate—even maddening—given the unprecedented levels of energy and interest in racial justice.

White people who are just waking up to the realities of past and present racism are eager to learn more about racial issues and DiAngelo's superficial, misguided ideas

are some of the first they will encounter. That, I think, is a real shame.



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