

***Nice Racism* by Robin DiAngelo review – a deeply revealing lesson on white supremacy**

*A powerful new book from the author of *White Fragility* reveals why profound racism is often found in supposedly liberal spaces*



A protest against police brutality and racism in Nelson Mandela Park, Amsterdam

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In 1952, the anti-racist activist and librarian Juliette Hampton Morgan famously observed in a letter to a friend that polite white people were “our biggest problem” in combating American white supremacy. The outspoken southern white writer and teacher had been pulling emergency brakes on buses in Montgomery, Alabama when black patrons were intentionally left on the sidewalk, and wrote letters to local newspapers critiquing segregation. What horrified her just as much as the normalised treatment of black Americans was the way white decency obstructed social change. Seventy years later, [Robin DiAngelo](#) explores some of the enduring facets of this practice.

Citing deeply revealing and recurring anecdotes from her career as an anti-racist educator, DiAngelo analyses how white Americans who deem themselves inoculated against racism uniquely embody racist practices, including herself. (She characterises racism as “a collective racial bias backed by legal authority and institutional control”, in which individuals and communities participate.) DiAngelo pertinently distinguishes anti-

racist strategies from the valued currency of white friendliness, writing: “Niceness does not indicate a lack of racism and is not the solution to racism. Nor does a culture of niceness indicate that racism is not present in the environment.” As evidence for this assessment, she describes straight-up racial illiteracy (such as the perennially irksome “people should just see each other as humans”) from proud liberal attendees who insinuate that they are beyond a workshop on race, demonstrating how a gradation in white supremacy is nevertheless white supremacy.

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Highly instructional, with pertinent questions for white readers who consider themselves sufficiently “woke” or have felt “attacked” in discussions around race, *Nice Racism* interrogates the machinery of white progressiveness and how these gears actually work; many of these liberal-sanctioned tactics still prioritise the insecurities, performance, pride and superiority of whiteness over the literal needs of racially marginalised communities. And yet, across the political landscape, these are the very “so-called open-minded white people” that Bipoc (black, indigenous, and people of colour) are encouraged to find legislative or civil alliances with when combatting racism. DiAngelo’s book brings scrutiny, racial theory and first-hand experience to what many people of colour already know: “It’s places like the Democratic National Convention, the ‘feminist’ book club, the liberal-identified workplace where you will encounter some of the most profound racism you’ve ever experienced.”

Tedious, defensive tropes that are commonly used against critiques of racial illiteracy – such as adopting black children, having a partner of colour or a “diverse” group of friends – are dissected and refuted almost mathematically. DiAngelo explores the ideology of white feminism as a product of nice racism, in which many of these dynamics are employed by white women to the denigration, silencing and decentralising of women of colour in “feminist” spaces. It’s here that DiAngelo underscores that nice racism, as a concept, doesn’t just impede racial consciousness but can also foster hostility towards those prompting it. Nice racism is not so nice when you push back on it.

DiAngelo recounts a number of workshops and discussions led specifically for white women. In one for white self-identified feminists, she asks the participants to compile a list of advantages of being white, for discussion. According to DiAngelo, one group rattles off the pedestrian – not being followed in stores and ample representation in media – before caveating these personal observations with the claim that motherhood is “universal to all women, regardless of race”. DiAngelo responded: “Motherhood is

perhaps one of the *starkest* examples of the differences between white women and black women,” referencing racism in healthcare, education, infant and maternal mortality rates, among many other issues. The progressive white feminists were so offended by this correction, at an equity conference no less, that they left during the break and sent a message to DiAngelo to say that they weren’t coming back. White feminism often writes itself.

Most potent though is DiAngelo’s urgency to get the reader to consider whiteness: its illusions, promises, assumptions and casual narratives of self-importance. It’s in these spaces that we see white supremacy at its most unadorned: the inflation of self based on the mythology that racism has afforded. DiAngelo’s participants mirror back this wholesale belief, so much so that when she asks them to scrutinise the racial superiority they have inherited, they can’t. They see being white as “neutral” in an otherwise racialised world that they often don’t feel equipped to speak in.

I think of this lens when she pointedly prompts white readers: “We might ask ourselves why we think the best response to racial inequality is niceness.”

It’s a question only they can answer.

Nice Racism: How Progressive White People Perpetuate Racial Harm is published by Penguin.