

The Displays: On Anti-Racist Study and Institutional Enclosure

by **DAVID JAMES HUDSON**

Abstract

While the intensified uprisings prompted by anti-Black state violence in the spring and summer of 2020 have been inspiring in many respects, they have also been accompanied for many of us by feelings of pessimism, particularly in relation to the institutional interest in racism and antiracism that has surged alongside the uprisings. This article uses a reflection on such pessimism as a starting point, situating it in contrast to appeals to vocational awe (Ettarh 2018) surrounding information work, and locating it as a gut reaction, a feeling that the outpouring of institutional attention will ultimately prove limited, that it is finite and cyclical. It explores as an explanation for the limits of such attention the institutionalization of anti-racist discourse as a process of incorporating, enclosing, and neutralizing racial liberation movements. In particular, it locates the explosion of interest in anti-racist study—the ubiquitous reading lists, the displays, the book clubs, the LibGuides—as a site of these dynamics of enclosure, focusing specifically on the widespread circulation of Robin DiAngelo’s *White Fragility* (2018) as emblematic of the ways in which the popular genre of anti-racist texts focused on self-work contributes to such enclosure as through its operation as an exalted site of study within the hegemonic conditions of racial capitalism’s anti-racist discourse. It concludes with a reflection on the possibility that an informal study group around Robyn Maynard’s *Policing Black Lives* (2017) planned for the 2020-2021 school year might serve as a site of reprieve from and opposition to such dynamics.

Keywords: *anti-racism, racial capitalism, Black Lives Matter, reading*

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Pessimism

We often associate racial capitalism with the central features of white supremacist capitalist development, including slavery, colonialism, genocide, incarceration regimes, migrant exploitation, and contemporary racial warfare. Yet we also increasingly recognize that contemporary racial capitalism deploys liberal and multicultural terms of inclusion to value and devalue forms of humanity differentially to fit the needs of reigning state-capital orders.

Jodi Melamed, "Racial Capitalism"¹

It is early June, and corporate media is no longer able to ignore the uprising and everyone is issuing statements. I'm exhausted, working from home, wondering how long I get to explain this feeling of overwhelm by calling myself a "new" parent, wondering about my child who most people think is adorable but who will be viewed as more adult-like as early as five,² wondering about my child whose skin is slightly darker, whose hair is curlier, whose nose is flatter, whose squealing giggle is adorable. I'm exhausted, trying to process all this as I cycle through the routine of get up, wake child, potty child and change diaper, sing to child while making breakfast, feed child, offer kisses and reminders of love, walk for 35 minutes, return to basement, and continue to struggle to adjust to life working from home, trying to process the privilege of a paycheck, the polite, light-skinned, "Is-he-really-Black?-What-is-he?" privilege, the lying privilege of what might violently be called a "good" neighborhood, the fact that privilege seems important to acknowledge but also so, so, so inadequate as an analytic. It is early June, and there are beautiful things happening, inspiring things happening. There are also imperfect, perhaps severely limited gestures being made by people whom I trust genuinely do care. There are ups (the surge of attention to abolition, the statues of refined predators toppled into the rivers) and there are downs (the deadly violence of police "wellness" activities from which the public attention to uprising provides no apparent reprieve³) and it's disorienting.

I am called upon to ground myself, to respond as a library worker, the appeals to what Fobazi Ettarh has called "vocational awe"⁴ somewhat self-critical this time,⁵ but present nonetheless.⁶ It is a

post to cling to, it is said, the mission of information provision framed as a clear and concrete course of action *in these troubled times*. But most of what I feel is pessimism.

The statements have been made. They say *we hear you* and *we have a lot of work to do*, and they use words like *commitment* and *reflection* and *enlightenment* and *unity* and *action*. These statements will be buried. The displays will come down, the carefully crafted slide-shows dropped from prominence, the banner images swapped out, the same stories about competing priorities and sharing space appearing as they have appeared every year in the efficient boxing of materials and folding of tables in the waning days of February. The reading lists have been circulated in a frenzy, as #syllabi, as LibGuides, a new one each day it seemed at a time, sometimes alongside sharp exhortations that *every. white. ally. must. read. these.*, a mishmash of texts, the Fieldses alongside the Obamas, Coates alongside Shakur, Fanon alongside Winfrey, Michael Eric Dyson alongside Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor. But this frenzied sprint will collapse and the lists will come down, pages everywhere littered with dead links. The book clubs too will languish, as they seem to do, the warmth of sense-making, the feeling that this might be something concrete one could do giving under the pressure of ambition, shame, failure, under ever-staggering demands of capital and compressed time. There will be last gasps, to be sure, the common reading programs, the conference themes—Blackness one year, Indigeneity the next—and these will inevitably be swapped out for new themes, just like the displays, marking artifacts of those brief windows of time when Black life mattered, at least in a certain sense—when it seemed worthy of study.

The questions quickly follow about the extent to which study—group study, self-study—can be regarded as a legitimate contribution to struggles against racial subjugation. Reading about race, racism, and anti-racism is not itself an act of anti-racism, it is said, only a step towards it.⁷ Emphases on consciousness-raising generally, it is argued elsewhere, can actually weaken anti-racist efforts by diverting energies away from community-based movements to address structural phenomena and

into symbolic, privatized acts of “listening” and “learning” that merely foster self-congratulation.⁸ The book clubs specifically, it is argued along similar lines, function as comfortable, enclaved anti-racist performances for those understood to be white.⁹ There are pointed questions about the intended audience for these education efforts, about who they are understood to be and what they are understood to know and not know, and there are questions about the effectiveness of self-directed study for such audiences on such topics.¹⁰ There is skepticism that much of the content on the lists, in the displays, or, indeed, in the clubs will actually go unread, unwatched, unengaged, that so much of this is little more than virtue signaling.¹¹

I still find myself suggesting books and lending them out to friends. I still respond without hesitation to a request to help my institution put together a digital display and reading list. I still move to develop a book club for the upcoming academic year. It occurs to me that there are a multitude of reasons for the fading of public discourse on and apparent institutional interest in Black freedom struggles—the vicissitudes of corporate media cycles driven by sales of novelty and circumscribed analysis, the reduction of uprising to a hot topic, Black life to an atomized matter among other apparently distinct stories like *economy* and *health* and *environment*, the industrially produced whittling of so many attention spans, the inevitable exhaustion of performative wokeness. It occurs to me that people are indeed exhausted, that it has been said that there has to be room to breathe, that word ever more loaded now, as if breathing and that which impedes it—which is made to impede it—were not always present, always a pressure, always loaded, always going off.

It occurs to me to consider that this pessimism, this unsettling feeling of the inevitability of the removed displays, lists of dead links, and buried statements of institutional support may not in the end, be rooted in a fantasy of liberation that centers sustained self-education and assimilation of ideas into existing institutions. Perhaps the pessimism is a recognition, rather, that the inevitability of fading institutional attention is a product of the terms of such attention to begin with. Perhaps it is a

response to witnessing, again and again, the moves of dominant institutions rooted in racial capital, which is to say capital, which is to recall, following many others, that racial capitalism is not a localized and especially harmful version of capitalism, but rather the structuring and sustaining centrality of racially animated violence within capitalism.¹² Perhaps it is a response to the repeated moves by which these same institutions prove able—under certain circumstances, at certain times, in certain notably circumscribed ways, for certain durations—to acknowledge (perhaps even to proactively state) that Black life matters (at least in a denotative sense, an assimilationist sense). It is a striking thing, to find oneself reading the intensification of institutional interest, imbued with such hope, as a fading, a waning, a withering. But to witness the waves of such interest is to hear what Ruth Wilson-Gilmore has called “the state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death”¹³—in a word, racism—referenced and recast at the lips of institutions that cannot, structurally speaking, divest themselves from that which they say *has no place on this campus, has no place in this library, has no place in our business*. It is to witness the moves, the loudest turns of phrase and seemingly unquestionable definitional logics, the readily available anti-racist commonsense by which the beautiful threat posed by this movement and moment is enclosed, incorporated, neutralized.

Enclosure

This tragedy—in a long series of similar tragedies—raises a long overdue question: How do we end systemic racism in our society? The only way to see ourselves in a true light is to listen to the voices of so many who are hurting and grieving. Those who set out to silence those voices do not understand the meaning of America—or how it becomes a better place.

George W. Bush, June 2, 2020¹⁴

That this is a moment not only of uprising but also of enclosure is clear. There are, of course, the more obvious attempts to manage into nonexistence actions that directly confront the structural persistence of racial subjugation. The police march and kneel and bow their heads alongside

protestors, then revert to their enshrined mode of protecting racial capitalism through force, the tear gas and batons and mace and abductions appearing, in numerous cases, momentarily after these postures,¹⁵ these countermoves, these tactics of what one police chief tellingly called “de-escalation.”¹⁶ There is stated concern, too, among the owners and managers of the National Football League (NFL), that site at which so many expressions of the gendered and racialized exploitation and dispossession by which the social order is sustained appear in what seems to be among the most concentrated form on public display (even if one sets aside the case of Colin Kaepernick).¹⁷ United States (US) senator Mitt Romney marches alongside protestors,¹⁸ the US Democratic Party kneels draped in Kente cloth,¹⁹ JPMorgan Chase CEO Jamie Dimon kneels with staff for a photo in front of a Chase Bank vault,²⁰ Washington, DC mayor Muriel Bowser renames a portion of a street close to the White House “Black Lives Matter Plaza” after having the slogan painted on the street in massive yellow lettering,²¹ and the New York Stock Exchange bell rings on June 19th (it does, of course, almost every year, but this time it is rung in “observance” of Juneteenth at the hand of Ford Foundation president Darren Walker).²² All this takes place against the backdrop of a swarm of statements from the CEOs of Apple, KPMG, the Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce, Raytheon, Comcast, Coca Cola, and other members of the predator class.

The language of such management shows signs of a shift in this moment—though perhaps it might more fittingly be described as a *pivot*. The efficient corporate language of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) that has been a staple of institutions and that has dominated public discourse around race and power more generally has long been exposed, through one vein of “diversity” critique, as timid for its unwillingness to speak of difference with any specificity or to name racism or its particular manifestations; and as disingenuous and ineffective, given its track record of leading to little other than committees, reports, and perhaps a few more nonwhite faces in photographs. The pivot this time is sharp: this story of “diversity” and its terminological characters are not entirely absent (nor,

importantly, are its narrative logics), but they are now more prominently overlaid with the language of what Cedric Johnson has called a “militant racial liberalism,” one that is “strong in tone and carries a moral urgency but [is] fundamentally ... not a threat to our capitalist political economy,”²³ one that explicitly names racism, police violence, Black and other nonwhite communities, and the need for protest and other concrete action beyond the formation of committees. Strikingly, such militant naming has also widely incorporated the concept of systemic racism. Amazon, for example, states in no uncertain terms that it stands “in solidarity with the Black community—our employees, customers, and partners—in the fight against systemic racism and injustice.”²⁴ McDonald’s “stands” for “victims of systemic oppression and violence,” its one-minute silent social media video featuring the phrase “Black lives matter” as the second-to-last image, followed only by its famous logo.²⁵ Airbnb amplifies the voices of its own “Black@ Airbnb” employee group by sharing the group’s extensive “Activism & Allyship Guide,” which offers a detailed account of systems of injustice, “structures of privilege,” and suggested actions.²⁶ Washington State University leadership observes that the killings of Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and George Floyd, among countless others, are a “reminder and memorial of the ugliness of historic, systemic inequality,” of “our country’s severe racial and class disparities.”²⁷

Of course, there is a telling absence of any mention within these statements of their organizational authors’ structural investment in forms of racialized violence, whether it be the looting of public coffers, the eviction of communities deemed expendable, the deployment of forms of unfree labor that rob workers of the capacity to survive, or the foundational dependence on the eliminative dynamics of expropriated land.²⁸ What this suggests, though, is not a simple hypocrisy, by which a substantial assertion of systemic racism stands in unresolved contradiction to the actions of those who assert it. Rather, the institutional embrace of the language of “systemic racism” is, as so many moments of reconciliation seem to be, an act of incorporation animated by redefinition, a repackaging of the fundamentally individualist premises of racial liberalism. Situated as a prominent part of a

platform economy that both depends on and contributes to the profoundly racialized conditions of precarity, Lyft notes that “[s]ystemic racism is deeply rooted in our society,” and offers, in response, dialogue towards more “inclusive experiences” for its workers and customers,²⁹ along with its continued program of uplift through free rides that help nonwhite communities “close opportunity gaps.”³⁰ Operating as a key investor in the extractive and dispossessive racialized violence of Canadian tar sands projects and having reportedly donated to the Vancouver city police via the Vancouver Police Foundation,³¹ the Royal Bank of Canada “acknowledge[s] [that] wide-spread systemic racism has disproportionately disadvantaged Black, Indigenous and People of Colour (BIPOC) for far too long,” a problem first and foremost, it continues, because it hampers individual clients from these communities from “compet[ing] equally in opportunities for economic and social advancement.”³² A school so deeply connected to the US military and surveillance apparatus that it was ranked among the most militarized universities in the country in a recent study,³³ George Mason University frames its “action”-oriented statement acknowledging the widespread nature of racism through the familiar liberal anti-racist trope of bias (“conscious or unconscious”) and concludes, in equally familiar terms, with a rehearsal of the racism-as-illness trope: “Our nation is fighting two pandemics—the COVID-19 virus, and the pandemic of racism in America. George Mason University will address both with the same vigor and sense of urgency.”³⁴ In sum, the concept of systemic racism does not, in these assimilative stories, entail the recognition of the violent normalcy of a racially animated political-economic order without which the hedge funds, the pension plans, the universities, the sharing economy, the information society, the factories, the supply chains and pipelines and mining operations would crumble. It envisages, rather, the system-wide prevalence of ignorance, miseducation, bias, prejudice, a far-too-commonplace disorder in individual people, organizations, sectors, societies even, to be countered by widespread initiatives that seek to make such discrete sites more inclusive, to scale up individual opportunity systemically. This moment of

incorporation, then, enacts a reversal of the slogan often heard at demonstrations: *the system wasn't built this way—it is broken*. Systemic racism, the moment underscores, is a fundamentally empty signifier, easily folded into racial capitalism's pacifying impulses.

And just as this uprising is not only of the present moment, only new (or re-newed) in its momentary prominence, these accompanying dynamics of enclosure are part of a broader history of the institutional incorporation of anti-racism. As World War II approached, the white supremacy of skull science and racial hierarchization continued to be written explicitly and unapologetically into the logics, plans, policies, and valorizing materialities of Western capitalist nation-states. As the century aged, however, the deployment of such unabashed assertions of racial superiority in official state discourse became increasingly untenable. Western states faced the need to define themselves as morally superior to the blatant and undeniably horrific applications of white supremacy in the war, as well as finding themselves confronted with the intensifying pressures of anticolonial and racial liberation movements both globally and domestically. The result was a proliferation of official discourses of racial freedom, through which states came to present themselves as racially competent and inclusive.³⁵

The institutionalization of anti-racist discourse in the West was, of course, not the result of a moral awakening and structural retreat from a political economic order dependent upon racialized and racializing violence. Rather, to modify Sunera Thobani's formulation,³⁶ the shift represented a crisis, rescuing, and reshaping of racial capitalism. States like Canada and the US needed to attract labor from beyond traditional European markets to support economic expansion efforts, to attract international investment, and, as a means of asserting political legitimacy during the Cold War, to define themselves as bastions of freedom, inclusion, wealth, and equal opportunity in contrast to the image of impoverished, authoritarian Soviet society.³⁷ "The *old* imperialism—exploitation for foreign profit—has no place in our plans," US president Harry Truman said tellingly in his inaugural address

in January 1949, having just finished outlining the specific economic benefits of “uplifting” the “primitive” peoples of the world and inaugurating the supposedly benevolent and thoroughly racialized neocolonial venture known as the “development era.”³⁸ Western states’ self-presentation as racially aware and competent quite literally became a selling point, then, a practice that has persisted into the 21st century, taking the form, to cite just a few examples, of the Canadian government’s central deployment of tropes of racial inclusion in its bid for the 2008 Olympics,³⁹ Tourism Toronto’s marketing of the city as a haven of exceptional multiculturalism,⁴⁰ and the Bush administration’s highlighting of cultural sensitivity in detainee handling as part of its justification for the existence of the Guantanamo Bay torture site.⁴¹ In short, moves to adopt a racially competent self-image were moves to meet specific political-economic demands, moves to recuperate and resituate capitalist structural arrangements themselves rooted in racial subjugation and dispossession.

This history unfolded as a tension, then: even as states adopted officially anti-racist identities to rescue their existing capitalist orders, the confrontational work of racial liberation and decolonization movements and uprisings made it increasingly difficult to hide the racial hierarchy and violence upon which such orders continued to depend. The Black and Latinx rebellions in US cities in the mid-1960s, for example, prompted then-president Lyndon Johnson to seek answers by appointing the Kerner Commission (known formally as the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders), whose 1968 report—both an official government report and a publication with a wide popular readership—appeared to come strikingly close to naming white supremacy as a structural phenomenon, stating, of the conditions faced by poor Black communities in cities, that “[w]hite institutions created [them], white institutions maintain [them], and white society condones [them].”⁴² As Hughey demonstrates, however, these official findings of institutional dynamics of racial oppression were accompanied in what was a deeply inconsistent report by recourse to attitudinal, behavioral, and psychological explanations for white racism.⁴³ The circumstances and fraught

conclusions of the Kerner report gesture neatly, then, both to the tension created by racial capitalist states' adoption of official anti-racist identities in the face of racial uprisings and to the move through which such states have sought to resolve this tension: the institutionalization of a particular definition of racism that has detached it from political economy, that has de-emphasized racism as a collective structuring force within capitalism and that has relegated it—through political discourse, scholarship, legal rulings, and popular culture—to the realm of individual psychology and education—that is, to the realm of self-work.⁴⁴

This, then, is the limit of the popular anti-racist maxim that, in Ibram Kendi's prominent phrasing,⁴⁵ the “opposite of racist isn't ‘not racist’ [but] ‘anti-racist’”: racial capitalism has its own anti-racist discourses, its own substantive stories that deploy phrases like “systemic racism,” “police brutality,” and “anti-Black racism,” stories about how to understand and counter the racial subordination that governs our lives, stories circulated, popularized, entrenched so as to define the boundaries of what is knowable as race, racism, and anti-racism—stories that work, ultimately, in service of its material interests.

Fragility

The value in “White Fragility” lies in its methodical, irrefutable exposure of racism in thought and action, and its call for humility and vigilance. Combatting one's inner voices of racial prejudice, sneaky and, at times, irresistibly persuasive, is a life's work.

*A review of White Fragility in the New Yorker*⁴⁶

It is early June, and an email has been forwarded to an internal listserv at my library. Originally sent to the list for the Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education, the email is direct and explicit in its naming of anti-Black racism, calling upon its readership (especially those identified as white) to “transform our anger, grief, and shock into meaningful anti-racist action.”⁴⁷ It offers links to a variety of readings about racism in higher education within the bounds of the Canadian nation-state,

as well as information about how to offer material support to and participate in some of the actions of grassroots organizers. The first recommendations it offers, however, appear in the form of a list of “resources for understanding [and addressing] anti-Black racism generally,” a list half made up of texts by Robin DiAngelo, including three handouts and her 2018 book *White Fragility*. As has been widely noted,⁴⁸ DiAngelo’s already bestselling book has seen a dramatic resurgence in interest, dominating book sales for weeks on end in the wake of public attention to the uprising, along with other prominent anti-racism texts geared to a popular audience, including Kendi’s *How to be an Antiracist*, Layla F. Saad’s *Me and White Supremacy*, and Ijeoma Oluo’s *So You Want to Talk About Race* (the latter two of which were also included among the email’s initial recommendations). *White Fragility* has indeed been the most prominent among these texts, appearing, it seems, as the subject of every other book club, on every other anti-racism LibGuide (in numerous instances within a dedicated section), as a “staff pick” on every other bookstore website, as the trigger of a surge of invitations to enlighten every other institution of racial capital newly clad in anti-racist militancy—Goldman Sachs, Under Armour, Nike, the US Democratic Party establishment, among others.⁴⁹ The increased popularity of *White Fragility* has been accompanied by increased scrutiny of both the text and its author, even beyond the critiques of reactionaries whose knees jerk at any mention of racism as a contemporary phenomenon. DiAngelo’s prominence, it is argued, is due in no small part to her whiteness, which makes her more palatable as an anti-racist speaker. Nonwhite communities have been writing about racism and anti-racism for a long time, it is observed, including about the sorts of fraught interpersonal dynamics of whiteness upon which *White Fragility* focuses. Against the backdrop of an uprising that is directly challenging the white domination that has, among other things, shaped the publishing world, the veneration of DiAngelo, it is suggested, amounts to a bitterly ironic erasure of such writers—especially Black writers, the amplification of whose voices has been a point of central insistence in virtually all corners of the movement. Reportedly pulling in sizable speaking

fees, DiAngelo, it is argued further, is effectively extracting material gain from the violence of racial subordination. “It seems a bit counterintuitive for anti-racism educators who directly benefit from having white privilege to be paid exorbitant rates to help others dismantle their own privilege,” one such critic argues: “How much of a vested interest can someone have in deconstructing systems that they directly profit from?”⁵⁰

What makes *White Fragility* of particular interest here is less its author’s whiteness, however, than the book’s operation as an exceptionally visible example of the genre of anti-racist self-work that has surged in popularity since late May, the meaning of the popularity of such texts amidst the surging institutional incorporation of moves to racial justice. In a review essay framing such texts as “the literature of white liberalism” (a “multiracial formation” that includes the works by DiAngelo, Kendi, Saad, and Oluo mentioned above, as well as Crystal Fleming’s *How to Be Less Stupid About Race* and Reni Eddo-Lodge’s *Why I’m No Longer Talking to White People About Race*), Melissa Phruksachart quite rightly suggests that the genre cannot simply be dismissed as a consistent, conscious, and unapologetic defense of racial capitalism’s official anti-racist discourses, that its texts are themselves more nuanced than most critics acknowledge. The genre’s authors speak, Phruksachart observes, to interpersonal dynamics of racism that directly and materially affect people’s lives, as well as to processes of interpersonal and emotional accountability that, were they to be taken seriously in masculinist, white-dominated left spaces, would radically expand the capacity of movements to dismantle racial capitalism.⁵¹

There is certainly some degree of complexity to *White Fragility*, such that it would be difficult to come away from a careful reading of its pages—especially one conscious of distinctions and interrelationships between micro- and macro-dynamics of racism—with an understanding of the text as a totalizing anti-racist framework that hinges on limiting racial politics to the interpersonal. DiAngelo makes it clear in the opening chapter both that the book should not be read as an “attempt

to provide the solution to racism” and that the concept of white fragility does not explain racism as whole, referring rather to a specific phenomenon that inhibits work towards racial justice: “My goal is to make visible how one aspect of white sensibility continues to hold racism in place: white fragility.”⁵² Anyone who has attempted to have frank conversations about race and power in spaces dominated by those understood to be white would likely recognize the very real dynamics that DiAngelo is naming. *White Fragility* is also built around a direct challenge to the reduction of white supremacy to individual malice. DiAngelo explicitly offers a definition of racism, likely familiar to anyone who has taken anti-oppression training, as group prejudice backed by legal and institutional power, as “a far-reaching system that functions independently from the intentions or self-images of individual actors.”⁵³ She situates this definition by pointing to the larger social, cultural, and historical development of white supremacy and to the ways in which these patterns manifest broadly in the present day, even making passing gestures to racism as a manifestation of racial capitalism, as rooted in exploitation, elimination, and dispossession driven by the material demands of particular political-economic formations.⁵⁴ In a recent interview, DiAngelo indeed stated explicitly that capitalism is “bound up with racism.”⁵⁵

What DiAngelo says next in the same interview is instructive, however: “I avoid critiquing capitalism [because] I don’t need to give people reasons to dismiss me.”⁵⁶ The admissibility of anti-racist storytelling in a racial capitalist order, in other words, is contingent upon on such stories’ ability to operate within the bounds of institutional logics, to generate meaning productively without meaningfully threatening the order’s reproduction.⁵⁷ The work of *White Fragility* as a site of institutional enclosure, then, is in a sense less a problem of the text itself than it is a problem of its context—less a problem of the totality of the assertions in its pages and their implications in the abstract and more a problem of the backdrop of the hegemonic discourse of anti-racism as self-work

against which the text has come to be exalted, alongside others in its bestselling genre, as a preferred vehicle for anti-racist study.

This problem of context becomes clear when one considers, in particular, the emergence of anti-racism training as a key institutional expression of the centrality of self-work within official anti-racist discourse. The prominent role played by the US military in the institutionalization of such training is especially revealing.⁵⁸ The military establishment had already begun to respond to the new era of official racial competence heralded by Truman—and, as Day notes, to the need for more military labor to support its role in the Korean War—with efforts towards desegregation and directives towards “equal opportunity.”⁵⁹ The urban uprisings of the late 1960s that spurred the Kerner Commission were accompanied by Black rebellions against racially degrading conditions on bases and at other military sites at home and abroad.⁶⁰ The Department of Defense responded through an increasingly coordinated and expansive regimen of anti-racist education, leading to the establishment of the Defense Race Relations Institute (later renamed the Defense Equal Opportunity Management Institute) as a means of implementing anti-racist education as a standard requirement for all personnel. It was, of course, outside the scope of such educational programs to address the existence of US military missions as acts of racial capitalist expansion, as actions through which racialized difference and value was both explicitly and implicitly mobilized to justify massive loss of life as a means of securing what President Eisenhower, referencing US interest in Indochina, called “the specific value of a locality in its production of materials that the world needs.”⁶¹ The anti-racist training program has operated not simply alongside such racial violence, but in express service of it, seeking to excise detrimental racial attitudes and behaviors so as to support what the institute has called “mission readiness.”⁶²

Similar training emerged in the corporate sector, as well as police forces and other government institutions, in response to legislation (and the accompanying threat of legal action) as

well as to shifting public attitudes.⁶³ Such education largely appeared under polite banners like “human relations training,” “equal employment opportunity training,” and “cross-cultural, ethnicity and race relations training,” seeking in these contexts to reduce “racial tension” within a given environment or more simply to ensure legal compliance. It also took more confrontational forms, however, including Judy Katz’s influential “White Awareness” framework of the late 1970s, which directly named white racism (as both a systemic phenomenon and a mental disorder) and provided a comprehensive program for anti-racist personal reform;⁶⁴ and Peggy McIntosh’s prominent 1988 account of white privilege as an invisible knapsack, the unpacking of which has since become a staple exercise for participants in anti-racism workshops.⁶⁵ There are, of course, marked differences between the organizational, disciplinary, and community contexts in which these various formations of anti-racism training emerged, the specific languages they employ, and the extent to which they conceive of racism as a problem of localized interpersonal disharmony or systemic white racism. The common element that has enabled their operation as forms of hegemonic anti-racist discourse, however, has been their recourse to methods of personal practice: any reference to white privilege and racism as a long-established, systemic phenomenon is ultimately recuperated through the assertion of an anti-racism that centers the systemic reform of individuals and, to paraphrase Sara Ahmed, organizations-as-individuals,⁶⁶ a move that works not to dismantle racial capitalism, but to reconcile the tensions of its foundational racism and official anti-racism into a more perfect union—to enhance, in a phrase, its mission readiness.

Against such a backdrop, then, *White Fragility* operates not merely as a detailed account of a specific interpersonal dynamic of racial violence, nor can its prominence simply be attributed to its status as an accessible point of anti-racist entry at a time of intensified public interest in the dignity of Black life. Rather than a sign of a self-immolating institutional shift towards the dismantlement of the structures of racial subordination through which our bodies and spirits are repeatedly broken in

service of entrenched socioeconomic normalcy, the frenzied circulation of *White Fragility* is emblematic of the moves to enclosure embedded in the very terms of institutional attention. Put differently, the relative elevation of DiAngelo's text and others in its anti-racist self-help genre as foundational texts for what Phruksachart calls the "Great Awakening of 2020"⁶⁷—the re-assertion of study as a focused response to uprising—is not simply the result of their digestibility; they are easily and widely digestible, rather, precisely *because* their overwhelming conceptual orientation towards interpersonal dynamics and self-work aligns with the dominant individualist understandings of race, racism, and anti-racism that have been so aggressively asserted in the institutional spaces of racial capitalism.⁶⁸ Perhaps there are corners in which frameworks that focus so heavily on interpersonal dynamics and individual reform might serve as a pathway towards genuine engagement with racial violence as a structural foundation. But under the contextual weight of white supremacy's hegemonic anti-racist logics, any gestures within such frameworks towards the unavoidable existence of structural foundations fall out of sight. Like white privilege, microaggressions, implicit bias, and other anti-racist analytics oriented towards examination of very real microdynamics, the concept of white fragility comes to be taken up not as a reference to a finite phenomenon but as a vehicle for articulating the interpersonal as a totalizing anti-racist explanatory framework.⁶⁹ In this respect, the problem of *White Fragility* and other texts in its genre is not simply that they are limited as introductory texts in their ability to account for the persistent structural dimensions of racialized violence. It is rather that their prominent failure to attend to such dimensions, as well as to the incorporative dynamics of institutional anti-racist discourses, translates into work in service of such dynamics and the material interests of racial capitalism they ultimately support. And it remains a translation on wide display, whether as the investment in both anti-racist professional competence and racially animated and enforced precarity at the core of a temp agency that remains one of the world's largest employers;⁷⁰ as the explicit, "embedded," and "scalable" anti-racist business practices

and advocacy of a technology company whose products enable the administration of Israel's settler-colonial violence on multiple fronts;⁷¹ or as the bombers raining imperial violence streamlined through banal calculations at a company consistently ranked on DiversityInc's "Top 50" list and noted for its comprehensive training "on micro-inequities and other interpersonal skill sets."⁷²

Inconclusiveness

To love all is to fight relentlessly to end exploitation and oppression everywhere, even on behalf of those who think they hate us [...] To love this way requires relentless struggle, deep study, and critique. Limiting our ambit to suffering, resistance, and achievement is not enough. We must go to the root—the historical, political, social, cultural, ideological, material, economic root—of oppression in order to understand its negation, the prospect of our liberation.

Robin D.G. Kelley, "Black Study, Black Struggle"⁷³

It is late August, and the statements have been buried. The solemn messages that institutions of racial capital released in support of Black life have been pushed down profiles and off news pages, replaced largely with information about earnings results, a new warplane, national lipstick day, and the history of dining at theme parks,⁷⁴ notably with no announcement that such institutions will move to break themselves up, to redirect the wealth they have extracted through mobilization of white supremacist mythologies, to support the establishment, amid the rubble, of a network of community-run organizations dedicated to rebuilding the life they have destroyed. In a different sense, however, the displays remain, the institutions *doing the work*, as the familiar refrain goes, on their own terms. The US Marine Corps has banned public use of the confederate flag from all its sites.⁷⁵ Netflix CEO Reed Hastings and Patty Quillin, both fierce advocates for charter schools, have together donated \$120 million to Black education efforts.⁷⁶ AT&T and WarnerMedia have announced support for a social justice film initiative, helping to "amplify diverse, young voices."⁷⁷ TimberCreek Financial, the property management company that initiated a massive eviction campaign against a community of poor, largely Black and Brown tenants in the Herongate neighborhood of Ottawa,⁷⁸ has signed the BlackNorth CEO pledge to diversify its corporate operations,⁷⁹ a broader part of an initiative by the

Canadian Council of Business Leaders Against Anti-Black Systemic Racism that also features an “At-Risk Youth” committee led by the former Toronto chief of police, Mark Saunders. And Amazon is set to release a documentary about Stacey Abrams that it has been helping to produce.⁸⁰ Toilet paper, hand sanitizer, hair dye, and print copies of *White Fragility* and *How to Be an Antiracist* are all readily available again, the latter two indeed remaining in Amazon’s top 100 bestselling books for the year (though most other titles related to racism have dropped out of sight).

Dijon Kizzee is stopped and killed by police for a bicycle code violation in Los Angeles. The outrage is localized, subdued in most other areas, virtually absent from timelines, from institutional communication channels, perhaps because Kizzee punched one of the officers, perhaps because he had a gun (it is said), seen by officers amongst clothes he dropped while fleeing (it is said), perhaps because he had a criminal record (it is factually noted), perhaps because such things make him not the sort of Black life that matters in any deep sense, more the sort of Black life that’s expendable, less notable. The uprising continues in so many ways, but many no doubt have their mind on other matters. It is hard to sustain interest when there’s so much going on, when institutional assaults on life and the possibility of dignity have not stopped, have indeed deepened, as the pandemic stretches on, as so many continue to face impossible decisions about their labor, their health, their education, their children. It is hard to sustain interest when the frameworks for doing so center around shock and spectacle, when the institutional terms for doing so offer relief of such shocks through the efficiency of individual reform, when doing such a something is seen as better than doing nothing, is celebrated prominently, its outer limits those of containment rather than mere capacity. So many of us are finding ourselves up against these limits once more, increasingly frustrated that our sincere desire to do something is channeled into spaces of institutional enclosure, the DEI committees and wellness initiatives and authorized employee resource groups recast as racial liberation, ostensibly collective

yet strangely isolating, promising *hard questions* that seem more like hard limits or else are endlessly deferred.

Amidst interrupted wireless connections, broken headphone jacks, and anxious convergence with equally anxious faculty and students, I am preparing to facilitate a series of informal gatherings with a small group of Black students in which we will undertake a slow, methodical reading of Robyn Maynard's *Policing Black Lives*. I do not know that it is a good idea for me to have taken this on, given how exhausted I am, but I am excited, nonetheless. We will be meeting every two weeks, discussing at most a chapter at a time, moving at a pace that allows us to surface and revisit the specific questions of individual participants and those that we share as a group. We will explicitly and intentionally make space to ask basic comprehension questions, acknowledging in an ongoing way that engaging with such texts and topics is challenging, and embracing the act of slowly nurturing basic shared understandings as a critical basis for group study. We will encourage a culture of examining Maynard's words themselves, grounding the discussion in a back-and-forth between these words and the realities of our lives beyond them. The book itself is beautifully written, an unflinching examination and fierce indictment of the persistence, centrality, and specificity (though, importantly, not exceptionality) of Black subjugation and resistance within the broader practices of racialized violence through which the Canadian settler state has continually reproduced itself. It has also seen a significant uptick in sales over recent months, appearing on the lists, in the displays, in some institutional statements even, though with nowhere near the prominence of *White Fragility*. This is not surprising, of course: while no text is inherently immune to the expansively imaginative moves of institutional incorporation, *Policing Black Lives* is not a self-help book.

Likewise, our gathering will not be focused on self-help, on how to be an anti-racist, on mission readiness. Still, the study group is less a grand act of subversion than it is an attempt to establish a space of respite, something perhaps akin to the fugitive spaces *in* but not *of* the university described

as the undercommons by Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, a concept itself grounded and beautifully elaborated by Robin Kelley in the context of the 2015 Black student uprisings at campuses across North America (including my own).⁸¹ By embarking on a slow, open-ended collective reading that intentionally centers practices of posing basic comprehension questions and close, critical engagement with the text itself and that surfaces the evolving questions of participants as a guide for discussion, the study group will unfold, I hope, as a space of relentless critique, vulnerability, and collective sensemaking away from the imperatives to perform expertise that so often structure silences in campus classrooms, the imperatives to guide study through pre-approved and institutionally recognized learning objectives, imperatives to frame learning as market readiness, as a transactional accrual of credit,⁸² as pursuit of efficient, actionable solutions. Such imperatives have, of course, come to be established as animating features of dominant cultures of education even beyond the formal curriculum, so it is unlikely that our study group will serve as a pure space of sanctuary. Still, in setting aside the elevation of reading and information sharing amidst uprising as *per se* an act of anti-racist heroism and instead attending purposefully to the questions of where, with whom, under what terms, and to what ends we are gathering to study, there is perhaps an opportunity to find reprieve from the dynamics of enclosure that have characterized institutionally valorized modes of anti-racist study. In these moments when the parts of our work that are normally invisibilized are suddenly noticeable, so many of us find ourselves approached first and foremost with questions about the shape of concrete solutions, about what initiatives might be undertaken to *make this an anti-racist library, an anti-racist campus, an anti-racist workplace, an anti-racist institution*. While these may well appear as sincere requests, they bypass far less manageable questions about the complex ways that racial subjugation manifests at the foundations of institutional operations in the first place. Given the dominance of such questions as the structuring point of entry for institutionally validated modes of anti-racist engagement, it is no wonder that so many moves to study arrive at

texts that might easily be read as outlines for personal reform, that might integrate neatly into strategic plans as bulleted priorities, achievable targets, measurable outcomes, that might serve as spotlighted features in annual reports, that might readily strengthen institutional missions. If our small study group unfolds in line with its vision, it will serve, in a sense, as a site from which to interrupt such containment, as a space to reject the imperatives to anti-racist efficiency and productivity, as a space of mutual support, open-ended learning and community making, and persistent critique of the sort captured by Kelley in the epigraph above. Perhaps the study group will collapse, though, for the reasons that so many such initiatives do. I don't know. But I remain hopeful.

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37. Anthony Q. Hazard, *Postwar Anti-Racism: the United States, UNESCO, and "Race," 1945-1968* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); Jodi Melamed, *Represent and Destroy: Rationalizing Violence in the New Racial Capitalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011); Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2016), 32–33; Thobani, *Exalted*, 146.
38. Harry S. Truman, *Harry S. Truman: 1949: Containing the Public Messages, Speeches, and Statements of the President, January 1 to December 31, 1949* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1964), <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/p/ppotpus/4729029.1949.001>, 115, my emphasis.
39. Yasmeen Abu-Laban and Christina Gabriel, *Selling Diversity: Immigration Multiculturalism, Employment Equity, and Globalization* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), 11.
40. Colin Rabyniuk, "Toronto's Latest Tourism Ad Is a Multicultural, Chest-Thumping Statement Piece," *Sharp Magazine*, March 6, 2017, <https://sharpmagazine.com/2017/03/06/torontos-latest-tourism-ad-is-a-multicultural-chest-thumping-statement-piece>.
41. Melamed, *Represent*, 153.

42. United States [U.S.] National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, *Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1968), cited in Taylor, *From #BlackLivesMatter*, 47. See also A. Sivanandan, “RAT and the Degradation of Black Struggle,” *Race & Class* 26, no. 4 (1985): 1–33. <https://doi.org/10.1177/030639688502600401>.
43. Matthew W. Hughey, “Of Riots and Racism: Fifty Years Since the Best Laid Schemes of the Kerner Commission (1968–2018),” *Sociological Forum* 33, no. 3 (2018): 619–642, <https://doi.org/10.1111/sof.12436>. Further, as Sivanandan notes, the recognition of *institutional* racism is not necessarily the same as recognition of *structural* racism: “On the face of it, the Kerner report looked like a radical statement [...] and though it connected racism with white institutions, nowhere did it connect the institutions themselves with an exploitative white power structure. So that oppression was severed from exploitation, racism from class and institutional racism from state racism.” See Sivanandan, “RAT,” 16.
44. Sivanandan, “RAT,” 16–17.
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49. Bergner, “‘White Fragility’ is Everywhere.”
50. Janice Gassam Asare, “If You Directly Benefit from Racism, Should You Be Profiting as an Anti-racism Expert?,” *Forbes*, August 18, 2020, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/janicegassam/2020/08/18/if-you-directly-benefit-from-racism-should-you-be-profiting-as-an-anti-racism-expert>, par. 4. Other examples of such critiques of DiAngelo include Rachel Elizabeth Cargle, “White Entrepreneurs Need to Stop Capitalizing on Black Culture,” *Helm*, June 22, 2020, <https://www.thehelm.co/what-is-cultural-appropriation-white-entrepreneurs-need-to-stop-capitalizing-on-black-culture>; Anastasia Kārklīņa, “Glorifying White Authors like Diangelo Erases Decades of Black Writing on Whiteness,” *Medium*, June 21, 2020, <https://medium.com/@mzfayya/glorifying-white-authors-like-diangelo-erases-decades-of-black-writing-on-whiteness-ff398327323a>; and Alexandra Tsuneta, “I Was Offered to

Write a Piece on ‘Healing Racial Wounds,’” *Fearless She Wrote*, June 30, 2020, <https://medium.com/fearless-she-wrote/i-was-offered-to-write-a-piece-on-healing-racial-wounds-c7681a490432>.

51. Melissa Phruskachart, “The Literature of White Liberalism,” *Boston Review*, August 21, 2020, <https://bostonreview.net/race/melissa-phruksachart-literature-white-liberalism>.

52. Robin DiAngelo, *White Fragility: Why It’s So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2018), Introduction, par. 10.

53. Ibid, chapter 2, par. 17.

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55. Bergner, “‘White Fragility’ is Everywhere,” par. 50.

56. Ibid, par. 50.

57. DiAngelo’s words are even more striking when one considers that the anti-racist training practice that she describes in the book involves as a central component a direct and unflinching confrontation of explosive dynamics of dismissal, and that DiAngelo herself suggests that she has developed the capacity to remain calm and productive in the face of massive anger responses from her audiences. DiAngelo seems prepared to face anger and dismissal of some sorts, but not of others. See DiAngelo, *White Fragility*, Introduction, par. 4–6.

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65. Peggy McIntosh, "White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming to See Correspondences through Work in Women's Studies" (Working Paper 189, Wellesley Centers for Women, Wellesley College, Wellesley, MA, 1988), https://www.wcwonline.org/images/pdf/White_Privilege_and_Male_Privilege_Personal_Account-Peggy_McIntosh.pdf.

66. Sara Ahmed, *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press), 45.

67. Phruksachart, "The Literature," par. 5.

68. Texts such as Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor's *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation* and Robyn Maynard's *Policing Black Lives* are written in a similarly accessible style. While these texts have certainly seen an uptick in sales, they have been nowhere near as prominent as *White Fragility* and other anti-racist self-help texts (even, in the case of Maynard, within the geopolitical borders of Canada, within which it was written). See Taylor, *From #BlackLivesMatter* and Robyn Maynard, *Policing Black Lives: State Violence in Canada from Slavery to the Present* (Halifax: Fernwood, 2017).

69. While a substantive analysis of other prominent texts that share *White Fragility's* genre is beyond the scope of this paper, it is nevertheless worth noting that such texts do not all build their arguments, as DiAngelo does, around the examination of a single microdynamic (such as white fragility). One might nevertheless explore a similar line of inquiry into the work of such texts' heavy, if conceptually varied, orientation towards individual reform, given the contextual weight of capitalism's dominant anti-racist discourses. One might ask, for example, about Kendi's location of his readers' racist and anti-racist identities in terms of individual ideas and policy or his extended elaboration of the familiar racism-as-cancer trope (framings that arguably both suggest structural redeemability); about Oluo's presentation of police violence as a problem of system-wide individual miseducation (not to mention her overwhelming emphasis on the interpersonal); about Eddo-Lodge's explication of structural racism in terms of the system-wide prevalence of individual bias and organizational exclusion; or about Saad's assertion of personal work as the starting point for structural change (the latter of which is presented in the familiar terms, again, of systemic individual bias). See Kendi, *How to be An Antiracist*; Ijeoma Oluo, *So You Want to Talk About Race* (New York: Seal Press, 2018); Renn Eddo-Lodge, *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People About Race* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017); and Layla F. Saad, *Me and White Supremacy* (Naperville, IL: Sourcebooks, 2020).

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