THE ROLE OF WHITE PEOPLE IN THE FIGHT AGAINST RACISM

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• *Provocations and topics for conversation* •

ABSTRACT

This article proposes the need for better engagement of white people and institutions committed to the promotion, advocacy, and guarantee of human rights in the battle against racism. It addresses some of the obstacles, challenges, and possibilities involved in this conflictive construction, especially regarding critical thought and in the process of deconstruction of whiteness as a place where subjective and symbolic material privileges in society are maintained and based on racism.

KEYWORDS

Human rights | Feminism | Public policies | Education | Racism | Whiteness | Institutional racism | Affirmative action

This article proposes the need for better engagement of white people and institutions committed to the promotion, advocacy, and guarantee of human rights in the battle against racism. It addresses some of the obstacles, challenges, and possibilities involved in this conflictive construction, especially regarding critical thought and in the process of deconstruction of whiteness as a place where subjective and symbolic material privileges in society are maintained and based on racism.

Racism is understood herein as a dehumanising phenomenon that denies dignity to people and social groups based on their skin colour, hair, and other physical traits or their regional or cultural origin. This is a phenomenon based on beliefs, values, and attitudes that systematise, perpetuate, and are continuously renewed. It is the structural base of unequal distribution of access to opportunities, to resources, to information, to attention, and to power in daily life, society, institutions, and state policies.

Within national and international contexts, there has been an increase in the political strength of ultraconservative groups that attack human rights, largely based on a notion of uncritical whiteness – a justification for racial hierarchies, defense of white supremacy,[1] spreading of hate for those who are poorest and those considered different. Given this situation, there is an urgent need to invest more intensely in developing processes that make the following possible: having and maintaining uncomfortable conversations; disrupting and reinventing perspectives; promoting learning processes; and reeducating on racial relationships, redetermining a new base for trust and for political alliances that result into more integrated and effective transformational actions.

These are processes that, while affirming the place of black and indigenous movements as the traditional protagonists in the fight against racism and broadening the conflicting notion of human rights,[2] places in check the view that racism is a problem of black, indigenous, and others from discriminated social groups, and actually encourage white people and institutions to to push for and transform racial relationships, going beyond simply support, solidarity and the political fight of "others".

I speak as a white, feminist woman who is an educator, researcher, and activist and has been seeking for many years to create an identity of a non-racist. This article is fed by the pains, doubts, contradictions, discoveries, analyses, and potentials, and by the political experience in this locus of tension, as well as by conversations with black and white authors who analyse the phenomenon of racism and especially the place of whiteness – of the white racial identity – in the maintenance of a racist order.

1 • The White Fragility

I have always been struck and challenged by observing the destabilising power that simple questions have on white people, even on many of those who are part of a reality-transforming

perspective. As a trainer of professionals in the field of education and as an activist and as a mother, I have witnessed recurrent situations resulting from a question I pose during my visits to public and private educational institutions.

The question is the following: how has the school been implementing the Law of National Guidelines and Bases (LDB), altered by Law no. 10.639/2003, and what has it been doing to fight racism? A product of the historical Brazilian black movement, Law no. 10.639 in 2003 changed the highest law on Brazilian education, establishing the obligation to teach African and African-Brazilian history and culture and ethnic-racial relationships in schools, following laws established in other countries with an African diaspora as a result of the slave trades during Colonial times.

Often, this question became a trigger for defensive answers, uncomfortable situations, aggressiveness, hurried justifications stating that such a problem does not exist because the school values diversity, and attempts to minimise or even disqualify the meaning posed in the question, as well as of those who were posing it. In many private schools, for example, these reactions were complemented by deconstruction of the importance of approaching the topic of racism based on the fact that most students are white or by politically erasing the racial issue based on the idea that the matter is simply a "topic" just like any other. In this and many other ways, such actions maintain the symbolic privileges that the white population has gained in the Brazilian education system.[3]

But why does talking about race make people so uncomfortable? In her book *White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk about Racism*,[4] the American anti-racism educator Robin DiAngelo approaches the reactions and difficulties that many white people have when confronted by the debate on racism and when provoked to consider how it manifests itself in their daily relationships.

For DiAngelo, this emotional fragility in addressing racism comes from the fact that most white people have grown up segregated from other racial groups and are particularly protected from the stress generated by racism, which is perversely present in the lives of black, indigenous, and other racially discriminated peoples.

This white isolation leads to a racially-comfortable environment with "protective cushions", without any development of the emotional and cognitive skills to face racial stress, to talk about racism, and face questions about white privileges. White people are rarely without these "protective cushions" and when it does it occur, it is usually a temporary situation and by choice.

White Fragility is therefore characterised as a state in which even a minimum level of racial stress becomes unbearable, unleashing a series of defensive actions. These actions include the externalisation of emotions such as anger, fear, and guilt and behaviours such as: arguments to deconstruct the importance of the topic and of those who bring it up, the inability to

have conversations, or simply fleeing from the stress-inducing situation. According to the author, the actions would effectively reestablish white racial balance and comfort.

For DiAngelo, White Fragility represents an aspect of whiteness which goes far beyond skin, defined as a constellation of dynamic, relational, and operational processes and practices at every moment and every stage of life in society. These processes and practices include basic rights, values, beliefs, perspectives, and experiences that are supposedly shared by everyone but are actually mostly found only among white people.

Ruth Frankenberg, another academic in this field, defines whiteness as a structural place from which a white person sees others and themselves, as a position of power, and a comfortable place from where it is possible to attribute to others something that one does not attribute to oneself.[5]

Given the diversity and heterogeneity present in any social group, in this case, the access to white privilege among white people must also be considered as something characterised by inequality (social class, phenotype, sex, gender identity, sexual orientation, place of residence, region, presence of a disability). As in other social identities and experiences of power, whiteness is diverse, contextual, and characterised by countless conflicts, but not subject to stereotyping. However, one of its main characteristics is seeking to be invisible through identification as a dominant normative standard representing the universal human being. This is especially conferred upon white, heterosexual, middle-class and upper-class males.

2 · Whiteness and Privilege

The 1990s witnessed the emergence of studies on whiteness in the United States, forming a field known as "whiteness critical studies", making the U.S. the world's main research centre on the topic. Starting from the 2000s, many countries such as England, South Africa, Australia, and Brazil increased their academic production on the subject.

Among the pioneers in whiteness studies, Lourenço Cardoso (2010) invokes black American sociologist W.E.B. Dubois (1868-1963), who discusses the white racial identity in his work *Black Reconstruction in the United States* in 1935. The black philosopher Franz Fanon (1925-1961), born in French Martinique, was one of the pioneers in the issue of white racial identity, advocating the need to free white people from their whiteness and black people from their blackness so that every person may fully enjoy their human condition.[6] The black South African activist, Stephen Bantu Biko (1946-1977) is also considered one of the pioneers in the analysis of whiteness, addressing the place of white people in South Africa during apartheid (1948-1994).[7]

The work *The Colonizer and the Colonized* (1957) by Albert Memmi, a French thinker born in Tunisia, addresses the importance of addressing the place of the oppressor in

colonial relationships and is considered a benchmark in the emergence of whiteness studies.[8] By migrating the issue from the oppressed to the oppressor, a movement that represents a real epistemological turning point, studies on masculinities within the field of gender studies gain space in the 1990s, led by feminist and LGBT researchers. The work of Raewyn Connell, the Australian transgender researcher who proposed the concept of hegemonic and counter-hegemonic masculinities, is considered innovative.

In Brazil, black sociologist Guerreiro Ramos is considered a pioneer in whiteness studies in the 1950s, questioning the fact that studies on racial relationships in the country were still limited to study of the black population. Cardoso sees the term "whiteness" used by Guerreiro Ramos in his experiment *Social Pathology of the White Brazilian* (1957) a contemporary meaning given to the concept of whiteness as something that surpasses physical traits.[9] For Ramos, the social pathology of white Brazilians would consist of denial: the denial of people with any black biological or cultural ancestry; of black ancestry itself; and of the influence of black people on the construction of the country.

In 1962, Gilberte Freyre used the term whiteness for the first time in the sense of "white racial identity" but questioned the terms "blackness" and "whiteness", given their association with a logic of duality not applicable to Brazil, which is seen by the author as a racial democracy due to the mixture of races.

Florestan Fernandes, Otávio Ianni and other intellectuals from the Paulista School of Sociology questioned the myth of racial democracy held by Freyre, expressing the violence, inequalities and countless conflicts that characterise the unharmonious racial relationships in the country and demonstrating how little black people are integrated into classes in society. However, these intellectuals are criticised for not addressing the place of white people in the construction and maintenance of racism in Brazil.

According to a survey by researcher Lourenço Cardoso,[10] who analysed Brazilian academic production on racial relationships from 1957 to 2007, whiteness studies emerge in the 2000s as a field of study in Brazil, and the works emphasise racial invisibility and historical silencing of the place of white people in research on racism in Brazil.

> *In my work over the last fourteen years, the first and most important aspect that draws attention in research debates, in the implementation of institutional programmes to fight inequalities, is the silence, the omission or the distortion that exists about the place that white people have occupied and still do, in fact, in Brazilian racial relationships. The lack of analysis of the role of white people in racial inequalities is a way of persistently reinforcing that racial inequality in Brazil is exclusively a black problem, since only these people are studied, dissected, problematised.[11]*

Among the authors on whiteness in Brazil, Edith Piza, Cesár Rossato and Verônica Gesser, Maria Aparecida da Silva Bento, Liv Sovik, Lúcio Otávio Alves Oliveira, Lourenço Cardoso, Lia Vainer Schucman, Ana Helena Passos, among others, stand out. The research by these black and white authors address issues ranging from constitution and maintenance of white privilege in Brazilian society, to how white people socially construct themselves as white while not recognising themselves as a racial group in Brazil; to white power over other racial groups, its effects and materialisms on the interlacing of subjective dimensions with structures of social power; of how racial hierarchies are perceived and experienced by white people as to diversity, inequalities, pacts, alliances and internal conflicts of the white group, among other aspects and dimensions of whiteness. During the past few years, the approaches to whiteness are becoming more complex, diverse and contextual.

3 • White People in Fight against Racism

Cardoso[12] identifies two types of whiteness: acritical whiteness, which defends white supremacy and natures racial inequalities, and forms a base for neo-Nazi movements, and the Ku Klux Klan, among others; and critical whiteness, which publicly disapproves of racism. He believes that in Brazil a large part of research has focused on approaching critical whiteness, presenting the contradictions between the public discourse against racism and the daily racist practices present in personal relationships and institutions, aligned with the myth of a racial democracy. A survey conducted by the Perseu Abramo Foundation in 2003 demonstrated contradiction, showing htat 87% of Brazilians believed that there is racism in Brazil, but only 4% recognised themselves as being racist.[13]

Through her research on whiteness among white people from the city of São Paulo, Lia Schucman suggests the hypothesis that programmess and campaigns such as *Onde você guarda o seu racismo?* (Where do you keep your racism?) and the debates on sharing of racial quotas at universities during the 2000s may have contributed to changes in the behaviour of Brazilians, in the sense of a greater recognition of their own place as people who practise racism.

In my PhD thesis, later turned into a book,[14] I also defend this hypothesis, given that in the 2000s (with the Durban World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance [2001] and election of progressive governments) there was strong politicisation of the debate on racial relationships in Brazil.

The debates on affirmative action in college education, in the job market and in media and communication; the obligation to teach African and African-Brazilian history and culture and ethnic-racial relationships in Brazilian basic education; presence of racism in the works of author Monteiro Lobato, an icon of Brazilian juvenile literature; the improvement in the production of information and the expansion of research on racial inequalities; the debate on the rights of *quilombola* communities and the strong action from youth and black women's movements played an important role in greater

politicisation among the left, which tends to be greatly resistant to exploring the racial issue as something that goes beyond inequalities of social class.

Based on this activity, generated by the political battle and considering the current context – with increased political strength of ultraconservative and ultraliberal groups referenced within acritical whiteness; misogynist masculinity that attacks the rights of women and of the LGBT population; naturalisation of economical inequalities through economic austerity measures; religious fundamentalism and reaffirmation of a hierarchical order – the following questions are posed: what is the place of white activists in a fight against racism? How to advance from critical whiteness to an anti-racist whiteness?

4 • Anti-racist Whiteness

I understand that a fundamental challenge is to determine the place of white people in the anti-racist fight, in the sense of going beyond a call for support to fight for black, indigenous and other racially discriminated groups, fighting for others. The overcoming of racism requires much more than that. It requires a different level of implication, especially from those who consider themselves as human rights activists. But what does it mean to be a white person in an anti-racist fight that is based on questioning white privilege?

The notion that I consider fundamental to the construction of an effectively democratic society is reciprocal recognition,[15] that is, someone who recognises themselves and others as deserving of dignity, rights, knowledge, social projects and life. Someone who evolves based on the understanding of their incompleteness and of alterity, in the sense of the capacity to recognise themselves in interdependent relationships with others and with the environment.

In this perspective, to be a white anti-racist person includes making oneself available to recognise and evolve within this interdependence; facing the discomfort of conversations about racism and to critically consider how whiteness is woven into the story of our lives, our relationships, our social practices and our institutions. To recognise that we have been educated to not recognise ourselves as white people, but as human beings who represent a disembodied universal humanity, the standard, the norm in a place of power.

This results in a type of "social blindness", a masking of our place as white people in social relationships and of the difficulty to perceive, read and understand racial inequalities, the development and maintenance of white privilege and the magnitude and complexity of suffering generated to the black and indigenous populations of our country: not only explicit violence, but subtle violence, silence, looks, omissions and the denial of human condition. In a way, this is also valid to understand other differences experienced as social inequalities, especially in matters of gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, regional origin, among others, in their intersectional interlacing in the lives of people and of the discriminated groups.

How is this done? How is a racial literacy developed[16] in a transforming perspective? How does one reeducate vision, hearing, senses? The contact with literature, movies, music, cultural production, with the life experiences of black people is just as important as the access to research and studies, to newspaper articles and to statistics that explicitly show show racial inequalities as a social phenomenon by the numbers.

And furthermore: it is necessary to be exposed to meeting these other people, testing the boundaries imposed by racial and social segregation that exist in Brazilian society and recognising that our point of view is always partial and localised. Segregated environments create acritical, distorted, comfortable whiteness. Therefore I believe that we must urgently see as inadmissible a democratic society of elites, who raise their children in exclusively white environments or, at most, restricted to the presence of black men or women occupying subordinate positions.

We must advance to normative frameworks and policies that deconstruct racial, social and territorial segregation, that strengthen the public dimension as a space for everyone and that require, for example, affirmative action within the entire educational system – in public and private education – not only as a measure to redress the black population, but for development of a democratic culture and of a critical and anti-racist whiteness in which whites understand their place in the maintenance of privileges and in the transformation of this reality.

The key to this process is not to cause white people guilt, but to stimulate their responsibility in the development of self-criticism, collective analysis and actions that enable effective transformations in the fight against racism as a system, ranging from daily relationships to institutions and public policies. This must be built "with" black people, with black social movements, indigenous social movements and other discriminated groups, recognising their political place as the historical protagonists of this battle.

The participation of whites in the anti-racist fight is important – as people and as political partners in this construction historically led by those who suffer the consequences of racism – but they should not be expropriators of this fight, nor disqualify, annul or deny the protagonism of these people, reaffirming the pitfalls and places of power of acritical whiteness. On the other hand, there is another pitfall of whiteness – falling into a comfortable, passive and accommodated place, protected from conflict, believing that only black and indigenous people can talk about how to face racism. It is fundamental to build spaces of negotiation and political trust, based on principles jointly agreed upon, so that we may learn to build political strategies *along with* black and indigenous people.

Regarding institutions, developing processes for educating on institutional racism is urgently needed,[17] ones that are not limited to theoretical explanation and disclosure of information, but which can enable experiences, self-analysis and group analysis among black and white people on the institutional places of power, processes and cultures that explicitly or silently sustain racism.

Regarding public policies, the challenge of this agenda includes defending and promoting policies for historically discriminated and violated populations as outlined in the Durban Conference – now strongly threatened by ultraconservative groups – and of testing whiteness and references to universalities of policies for all, showing their role in perpetuating racial, social and gender inequalities in the country.

For example, regarding the requirement of teaching African and African-Brazilian history and culture and ethnic-racial relationships throughout basic education in Brazil: nearly all educational leaders see this as a specific policy for black people, and not as a law that puts into perspective and instigates a meaningful review of the paradigm of what is considered as quality of education in Brazil.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that this desired transformation requires a willingness among white individuals to actively educate themselves in rebuilding of racial relationships, facing discomfort, the fear, the unknown, reeducating of perspective and listening, analysing and evaluating actions through conversations with black and indigenous people; deconstructing the development of privileges, of discrimination and of violence in daily life and in institutions, being open to discover all that we failed to see throughout the centuries and today – as human beings – by denying the recognition of dignity, knowledge, history, culture and civil values of African, African-Brazilian and indigenous people.

NOTES

1 • Lourenço Cardoso, "Retrato do Branco Racista e Anti-racista," *Reflexão & Ação* 18, no. 1 (2010).

2 • Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Documento Para o Encontro de Especialistas em Aspectos da Discriminação Racial Relativos ao Gênero," *Revista Estudos Feministas* 10, no. 1 (Jun. 2002).

3 • Lia Vainer Schucman, *Entre o Encardido, o Branco e o Branquíssimo: Branquitude, Hierarquia e Poder na Cidade de São Paulo* (São Paulo: Annablume Editora, 2014).

4 • Robin Diangelo, *Why It's So Hard For White People To Talk About Racism* (Boston: Beagon Press, 2018).

5 • Edith Piza, "Porta de Vidro: Entrada para a Branquitude," in *Psicologia Social do Racismo: Estudos sobre Branquitude e Branqueamento no Brasil*, orgs. Iray Carone, Maria Aparecida Silva Bento (Petrópolis: Vozes, 2002).

6 • Deivison Mendes Faustino, *Frantz Fanon: Um Revolucionário, Particularmente Negro* (São Paulo: Ciclo Contínuo Editorial, 2018).

7 • Steve Biko, *Escrevo O Que Eu Quero*. Série Temas vol. 21. Sociedade e política. Trad. Grupo Solidário São Domingos (São Paulo: Ática, 1990).

8 • Lourenço Cardoso, "O Branco-objeto: O Movimento Negro Situando a Branquitude," *Instrumento: Revista Estudos e Pesquisas de Educação* 13, no.1 (Jan/Jun. 2011).

9 • Cardoso, "Retrato do Branco Racista e Anti-racista".

10 • Cardoso, "O Branco-objeto: O Movimento Negro Situando a Branquitude".

11 • Maria Aparecida Silva Bento, "Branqueamento e Branquitude no Brasil," in *Psicologia Social do Racismo: Estudos sobre Branquitude e Branqueamento no Brasil,* orgs. Iray Carone, Maria Aparecida Silva Bento (Petrópolis: Vozes, 2002): 2.

12 • Cardoso, "O Branco-objeto: O Movimento Negro Situando a Branquitude".

13 • "Conheça a Pesquisa 'Discriminação racial', conducted in 2003," Fundação Perseu Abramo, Novembro 19, 2010, accessed December 5, 2018, http://csbh.fpabramo.org.br/o-que-fazemos/pesquisas-de-opiniao-publica/pesquisas-realizadas/conheca-pesquisa-discriminacao-racial.

14 • Denise Carreira, *Igualdade e Diferenças nas Políticas Educacionais: A Agenda das Diversidades nos Governos Lula e Dilma* (São Paulo: Ação Educativa, 2016).

15 • Gustavo Pereira, *Las Voces de la Igualdad: Bases Para una Teoría Crítica de la Justicia* (Montevidéu: Proteus, 2010); Denise Carreira, *Igualdade e Diferenças nas Políticas Educacionais: A Agenda das Diversidades nos Governos Lula e Dilma* (São Paulo: Ação Educativa, 2016).

16 • Schucman, *Entre o Encardido, o Branco e o Branquíssimo*.

17 • I note here the generation of many provocations and learnings in institutional racism developed from 2016-2018 by Ação Educativa. Ação Educativa is a human rights organization that I am part of, with assistance from the Amma Psique e Negritude Institute and the support of the Ford Foundation. On institutional racismo see: Geledés – Instituto da Mulher Negra, Guia Para o Enfrentamento do Racismo Institucional (São Paulo: Geledés, 2013); Instituto AMMA Psique & Negritude, *Os Efeitos Psicossociais do Racismo* (São Paulo: Imprensa Oficial, 2008). Denise Carreira e Ana Lúcia Silva Souza, *Indicadores da Qualidade da Educação: Relações Raciais na Escola* (São Paulo: Ação Educativa, Unicef, Seppir, MEC, 2013).

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