

Review Essay

How to Be an Antiracist

by Ibram Xolani Kendi

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Seeing and living racism, Ibram Xolani Kendi writes about it as a sensitive academician whose intensity is matched by care and concern for an informed, equitable society. Kendi founded the Antiracist Research and Policy Center at American University, where he was also a professor of history and international relations. In July 2020, he joined Boston University where he founded the BU Center for Antiracist Research and will serve as The Andrew W. Mellon Professor of History. For 2020-21, he is also the Francis B. Cashin Fellow at Harvard University as he researches another book.

The book reviewed here, *How to Be an Antiracist* (2019), is a *de facto* companion volume to Kendi's 2016 National Book Award study, *Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America*. Used frequently in this essay, *Stamped from the Beginning* is a major research study and narrative history of the effects of race and racism in the West. He was moved to write *How to Be an Antiracist* by the violent 2012 death of Trayvon Martin and killings of other black men and women during the research period of the 2016 book.

This book and Kendi's overall mission seek to address the fact that, while millions chafe under the effects of inequality, other millions can ignore it from behind social barriers. He tries to bridge this division by sharing his own scholarship and lived experience, in a way that speaks to a broader audience at a critical time.

On the edge of standard academic writing, Kendi uses episodes of his own transformation to exemplify the issues he is analyzing. His writing resonates his three-year study of the conjoined history of material and human exploitation that surrounds the invention of race. Because that research came to life in *Stamped from The Beginning*, to fully appreciate *How to Be an Antiracist*, one should view it in terms of the authority of that previous work, in which Kendi synthesized hundreds of major works to sharpen the history of the concept and applications of "race" and racism prior to and during its career in Europe, pre-Revolutionary North America, and the USA.

To catch Kendi's urgently monumental project of which this book is only a calculated part, one must contemplate the groping racism successively endured over the arc of racism's course so far: captivity; the Middle Passage; slave life in the plantation economy; the Civil War; false hope of Reconstruction; Jim Crow, lynching, and post-*Plessy v Ferguson* ignominies; the civil

rights movement and aftermath; and current discrimination and manipulations in real estate, banking, criminal justice system, and other inequities. Running through this honest, hopeful book is a thread urging cross-political policies and action based on a movement of people with “antiracist ideas.” For candidly lived and exhaustively researched insight, this book stands out.

The Construal and History of “Race”

Ibram Kendi wrote *How to Be an Antiracist* (2019) to marshal *Stamped from the Beginning’s* (2016) evidence that racism does not occur out of ignorance. Rather, race was construed to serve *interests*. He gives strong evidence to emphasize the order in which a hierarchical concept is developed. His confrontation and definition of racism depends on perceiving this progression: “A racist power creates racist policies out of raw self-interest; racist policies then necessitate racist ideas to justify them. [This cause-and-effect] lingers over the life of racism” (42).

Racism needs “race.” Though the concept we have come to know as race obviously points to consistent differences in human physical appearance, race should not bear all the meaning that humans have assigned it. For every ethnic group, particularly when some cultures develop in areas they consider themselves superior—in technology or institutions, for example—it has always been common to link their valued achievements to something unique about themselves. Discernible physical differences provide ready markers on which to attach categories of superiority and inferiority, providing the cover that those differences are natural. That is the construction of race.

Studies over the past sixty years concur that *ethnicity*, as a sense of peoplehood around which people associate, is a persistent feature of culture. However, though ethnic group reproduction over long duration can lead to stable occurrences of phenotypes that may vary greatly, humans of every ethnicity share almost identical human characteristics. In fact, the Human Genome Project found that humans share 99.9% of all genetic characteristics, and that a genetic basis for racial characteristics such as intelligence, compassion, bravery, ambition, or behavior is unfounded (53).

Ethnocentrism may involve judgment of physiological and cultural distinctions. However, racism is a more recent phenomenon that involves the assumption that cultural characteristics are inherited, strongly associated with physiological characteristics such as skin color, and are inherently superior or inferior to others’ cultures (2016:83-84; 358).

From the onset of European conquest of the Caribbean and Americas, ideals of liberty, equality, and freedom mingled with presumptions of European superiority. Kendi points to Aristotle, who “concocted a climate theory to justify Greek superiority in the fourth century BCE, saying that extreme hot or cold climates produce intellectually, physically, and morally inferior people who were ugly and lacked the capacity for freedom and self-government”

(2016:17). The Greeks, later the Romans, and Muslims after them all used this rationale to justify enslavement of Africans. Furthermore, they all also used a similar rationale to exploit slaves from throughout their own empires alongside Africans. Regardless of origin, Apostle Paul, in Colossians 3:22, counseled slaves to “obey [their] earthly masters... in singleness of heart, fearing the Lord,” with only the Galatians 3:28 caveat that slaves are “one in Christ” with their masters (2016:17). However, the concept of race was not developed and clarified until it became defined. By many accounts, including Kendi and his sources, it was done so by the Portuguese. They construed it to justify their leading role in enslaving Africans in the mid-fifteenth century, and as it continued in the colonizing of the Americas and Caribbean islands by Western Europeans.

Near the end of the fourteenth century, the source of slaves was not confined to one region. Muslim slave traders got their “slaves” from the “Slavic” people around the Black Sea, where clashes and captures between Christians and Muslims were particularly frequent and brutal. These slaves were sold in Spain, Portugal, and Italy, as well as North Africa, where Arab and Berber traders had land routes to sub-Saharan Africa (2016:19-20).

According to Kendi, it is crucial to note that this changed when Prince Henry of Portugal (1394-1460) saw opportunity to circumvent the Muslim traders by navigating the Atlantic around the dangerous Cape Bojador at the edge of the Western Sahara in what is now Western Morocco. His administration enabled his sailors to make the journey by building the lighter caravel ships that could manage the winds and shoals of that dangerous cape previously impassable, giving Portugal monopoly and the distinction of the world’s most prolific slavers (39).

The King of Portugal assigned one of his own chroniclers, Gomes de Zurara, to develop a narrative rationale for capturing and commodifying humans. After writing about Henry’s plans to displace the Muslim overland slave trade, and about Henry’s new ship technology, he wrote a glowing report of a particular event that would later justify this commodification. In 1444, six caravel ships carrying Prince Henry’s human traffickers brought back to Portugal 240 captives for auction at a market in Lagos, Portugal (Kendi 2016:23 and 2019: 40). The descriptions of these people showed that they were gathered from a range of African locations. In fact, some of them may have been Berber slave traders themselves. Yet they were all regarded as one group. Although the term *race* was not used, they were collectively called “Africans.” Kendi makes the point that this act of grouping people for profit and slavery paved the way for the later use of a term that would aggregate an entire continent’s people as a homogenous group. Certainly, there were both Christian and Muslim slavers before this occasion, but they captured people from Middle East, Eastern Europe, and Africa, whichever was easiest. Prince Henry changed that by cultivating an exclusive source in Africa. Kendi asserts this essential point in his history of the construal of race: Henry had no motive but profit and no other justifications for enslaving Africans than their relative ease of capture. The Catholic Church’s initial objection to

the capture and sale of humans necessitated a justification for this new enslavement enterprise. In response, Henry and King Afonso cleverly promised to convert their captives to Christianity and give them a better life in Portugal (Kendi 2016:24). Kendi writes of Gomes de Zurara's 1453 *The Chronicles of the Discovery and Conquest of Guinea*:

From the beginning, *to make races was to make racial hierarchy....* De Zurara grouped all those peoples from Africa into a single race for that very reason: *to create hierarchy, the first, racist idea. Race-making is an essential ingredient in the making of racist ideas, the crust that holds the pie. Once a race has been created, it must be filled*—and Zurara filled it with negative qualities that would justify Prince Henry's evangelical mission. (40, emphases added)

De Zurara supplied plenty such ideas in his account of Prince Henry's work on behalf of Portugal. With only reports from Berber traders and other captives, or observations from the few Portuguese forays into "Guinea" to capture people, Zurara gathered anecdotal judgments from which he wrote statements such as "[Blacks] live like beasts without any custom of reasonable beings.... They had no understanding of good, but only knew how to live in a bestial sloth' (40).

Of the estimated 927 slaves brought to Portugal from 1434-1447, Zurara wrote, "the greater part ... were turned into the true path of salvation" (41). For this claim, Henry was "blessed by successive popes" (42). The ruling Pope Nicholas V issued a papal bull *Romanus Pontifex* to King Afonso in 1454. It "granted" exclusive rights to territory, conquest, resources, and to capture, vanquish, and perpetual enslavement, as well as *those already taken* (such as those taken in 1444):

We [therefore] weighing all ... with due meditation, ... grant among other things free and ample faculty to the aforesaid King Afonso—to invade, search out, capture, vanquish, and subdue all Saracens and pagans ... and other enemies of Christ ... and to reduce their persons to perpetual slavery Thence also many Guineamen and other negroes, [already] taken by force, and some by barter ..., or by other lawful contract of purchase, have been sent to [Portugal]. A large number of these have been converted to the Catholic faith, and it is hoped, by the help of divine mercy, that if such progress be continued with them, either those peoples will be converted to the faith or at least the souls of many of them will be gained for Christ. (English translation of *Romanus Pontifex* by Pope Nicholas V, as published in *European Treaties bearing on the History of the United States and its Dependencies to 1648*)

From this early Portuguese enterprise, this justification model began and carried through the entire history of slavery. Powerful people enslaved others out of self-interest and justified

that enslavement by such racist ideas as proffered salvation and civilization and calumnies about Black slaves' limited humanity.

Once the idea of race was established, there was little questioning of its validity. Two centuries later, at the height of the attempt to classify humans scientifically, Carl Linnaeus reified and defined the races as red, yellow, black, and white, deliberately joining cultural and physical characteristics to create descriptions. Linnaeus described *Homo sapiens europaeus* as "Vigorous, muscular; Flowing blond hair, blue eyes; Very intelligent, inventive; Covered by tight clothing; Ruled by law." Africans fared less well: *Homo sapiens afer*: "Sluggish, lazy; Black kinky hair, silky skin; Flat nose, thick lips, females with genital flap and elongated breasts; Sly, slow, neglectful; Covered by grease; Ruled by caprice" (41; these descriptions are selected from various English translations of *Systema naturae*, 1758, 10th ed.).

Blessed by the church, informed by degrading descriptors, and assured by scientific classification, European colonists had justification to regard humans as fundamentally unequal and therefore not due the same respect, privilege, and freedom as themselves. This division was almost always justified and sometimes created and maintained by religion.

In fact, following British Puritan Richard Baxter's position on converting slaves, New England Puritan leader Cotton Mather (1663-1728) taught that Christians should bring about the conversion of slaves and to intentionally, for that purpose, buy slaves (though, originally, this was restricted to slaves who had voluntarily entered servitude) (Kendi 2016: 6,7; 22, 47-48). In the South, partly due to Mather's early teaching, this position was largely adopted by preachers and slaveholders as a justification for slavery in general. Cotton Mather wrote to Puritans in 1689 that, as a chosen people, they were to religiously instruct all "inferiors" including slaves, because African souls "are as white and good as those of other nations but are destroyed for lack of knowledge" (Kendi 2016:59). In his 1706 *The Negro Christianized*, he wrote that "the Providence of God" sent slaves to America to learn the "glorious gospel." At the same time, he assured his readers that baptism should not lead to the assumption of freedom for "the law of Christianity ... allows slavery," citing both Puritan theologians and the Apostle Paul (Kendi 2016:68-69). Kendi also quotes non-theologian George Best, an Englishman writing in 1578: "God willed that Ham's son and 'all his posteritie after him should be so blacke and loathsome that it might remain a spectacle of disobedience to all the worlde" (50).

Definitions and Principles

Against the background of these origins of race, and before continuing his analysis of the course of race in America, this review should assemble a few of his central definitions, by which he confronts the persistence of a racial divide. Data from every level of American society—education, housing and residential placement, employment and wages, the criminal

justice apparatus, politics and political and voting manipulations—reveal inequities race and perpetuated by those who benefit from that inequity.

First, Kendi defines *racist policy* as “any measure that produces or sustains racial inequity between racial groups. An *antiracist policy* is “any measure that produces or sustains racial equity between racial groups” (18). A racist policy, he says, is one that “leads to racial inequity,” such as a decision not to establish a full-service grocery store in a particular neighborhood. In such a case, Kendi may contend that a store chain plus the city council should address policy.

Kendi’s definition of *racist* is “one who is supporting a racist policy through actions or inaction or who is expressing a racist idea.” *Antiracist*: One who is supporting an antiracist policy through action or by expressing and antiracist idea” (13).

Then, perhaps the most revolutionary idea of the book is this: “The opposite of ‘racist’ isn’t ‘not-racist.’ It is ‘antiracist’” (9). Kendi then states the core of the doctrine by which he judges every racial decision in his system:

One endorses either the idea of a racial hierarchy as a racist, or racial equality as an antiracist. One either believes problems are rooted in groups of people, as a racist, or locates the roots of problems in power and policies, as an antiracist. One either allows racial inequities to persevere as a racist, or confronts racial inequities, as an antiracist.... The claim of “not-racist” neutrality is a mask for racism.... Denial is the heartbeat of racism. (9)

Kendi explains why he favors the word “racist” as descriptive rather than primarily pejorative as follows:

[O]ne of the core principles of antiracism... is to return the word ‘racist’ itself back to its proper usage. “Racist” is not ... a pejorative, ... not a slur. It is descriptive, and the only way to undo racism is to consistently identify and describe it—and then dismantle it. The attempt to turn this usefully descriptive term into an almost unusable slur is ... to freeze us into inaction. (9)

In the remainder of the book, Kendi breathes life into these definitions, recounting their application in his own life and in issues of life and death. Consider, for example, the graphic definition of *bodily racism*: “Perceiving certain racialized bodies as more animal-like and violent than others” (69-80).

Dueling Consciousness

To explain the convolutions of how Americans, both Black and White, grapple with race, Kendi bends a phrase coined by W.E.B. Du Bois to both connect to past striving attempts and to account for the intervening years since a similar term was used for similar purposes. Kendi takes W.E.B. Du Bois's term "double consciousness" from his famed "Our Spiritual Strivings," the lead essay in his 1903 *The Souls of Black Folks* and re-christens and redirects that concept to describe Black encounters with the pressure to segregate or remain segregated, or to assimilate, which he calls "dueling consciousness." That duel dates back to Du Bois's days, post-Civil War, when freed slaves were swirling in the maelstrom of a mostly inhospitable White society, or earlier, with abolitionists and integrationists encouraging Blacks to adopt White culture and become integrated into White society. Segregationists included many White Southerners and a host of Northerners who insisted that Blacks could never fit because of presumed inferiority or cultural difference. Many attempts to assimilate were viciously rejected—the days of the Ku Klux Klan and racist city folk as in Chicago, 1919, or Tulsa 1921. Name the American city and date and you can smell the smoke. The duel for the more successful Black middle class was and is between accepting the status assigned by segregationist Whites or working to assimilate by what he calls "uplift suasion," apart from poorly educated or battered Black poor people then or now. He writes:

The class that challenged racist [segregationist] policies from the 1950s through the 1970s began challenging other Black people in the 1980s and 1990s. Antiracism seemed like an indulgence in the face of the self-destructive behavior they were witnessing all around them [E]ducation and hard work would uplift [us] ... and would uplift all Black people.... [Assimilationists] were susceptible to the idea that it was laziness that kept Black people down, so they paid more attention to chastising Black people than to Reagan's policies [that] were chopping the ladder they climbed ... and punishing people for falling. (27)

Kendi places the original model for this attitude in the positions of well-meaning abolitionists, like William Lloyd Garrison who wrote in the preface to Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* in 1849, "Nothing has been left undone to cripple their intellects, darken their minds, debase their moral nature" (96), urging slaves and freedmen to pursue education and industry. An assimilationist position holds that a racial group is culturally or behaviorally inferior to dominant culture and needs enrichment to develop. A segregationist position expresses the idea that a racial group is permanently inferior and incapable of development and supports policies that segregate that group. Against these two positions, both inherently racist, Kendi mints his new coinage of *antiracist* to express that all racial groups are equals and need no development from another source. It supports policies

that reduces inequity among groups and rejects imposed cultural standards in favor of eclectic Black culture (24, 81).

Kendi cites examples from the presidencies of Johnson, Nixon, Reagan, and Clinton, to show the devastating impacts of policies from the 1960s to the 1990s. They led to much higher and more aggressive vigilance of Black communities and a quadrupling of incarceration of Black citizens between 1980 and 2000. He demonstrates how this entrenched the cycle of poverty (25).

Kendi mourns the duel between policies that elevate people from poverty to reach equality and those that fail to acknowledge inequities in employment, education, and policing (25-31).

While few Black people duel between an assimilationist and outright segregationist perspective, theirs is struggle like W.E.B. Du Bois framed in *The Souls of Black Folks* feud: “the peculiar sensation ... of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others” [i.e., White people] while still “not wanting to bleach [one’s] Negro soul in a flood of White Americanism” (28-29). For Kendi, *assimilationism* is the former, *antiracism*—all races are equal and supporting policies that reduce racial inequity—is the latter.

The assimilationist option is futile at achieving political change when privileged White people staunchly refuse to believe that major difference in family income and net worth (median net worth of White is ten times that of Black families [157]), neighborhood stability (White home ownership is 71%, Black is 41% [18]), and other measures are due to racist policies—laws, legal interpretations, informal practices, and social structures.

Kendi discusses this frustrating duel in the Black bid for the full rights of citizenship and voting, often dashed by voter suppression, by harsh and unequal voting laws aimed at Black voters, illustrated in detail. One example is the 2000 national election about which Kendi reported at the time. Nearly 180,000 ballots, most in black districts, were rejected for unspecified reasons during the actual voting process in Florida, resulting in a race won by only 537 votes that gave George W. Bush victory over Al Gore. Segregation was then and remains a large factor in voter list purges, ineligibility, and spoiled ballots (124-125).

Complexities in Black Life and Culture

To show the effects of racism in everyday American life, Kendi applies his definitions of racism to his own experiences and those of other Black Americans. One of his examples is to open a curtain on the ways he and people around him appreciate and rank skin color and hair texture differences. He recalls his university experiences when some of his friends tended to favor light-skinned people, while “some Black people took too much pride in Darkness. They inverted the color hierarchy as I did, ... disavow[ing] the Blackness of Light people” (118). “To be

an antiracist is to diversify our standards of beauty [as of] ... culture or intelligence,” he concludes (116).

He deepens this topic by recounting his own struggles with color preferences in his personal dating life. One of the important contributions of Kendi’s crystalline analysis of his own—and consequently all our—submerged racism is that it shows how to get beyond it. He begins by analyzing his implicit assumptions and perceptions of race as a child and his “color racism” as a university student. “I hardly realized my own racist hypocrisy,” he writes. “I was turning the color hierarchy upside down, but the color hierarchy remained” (112). “To be antiracist is to build and live in a beauty culture that accentuates instead of erases our natural beauty” (114). He acknowledges the presence of his criteria and shows how, without necessarily changing his behavior, he nevertheless acknowledged his own racism in such situations.

In many ways, Kendi presents himself in a parallel position to other Black readers, but also to Whites whom he is educating away from protesting that they are not racist. This combination of broad research and introspection leads to an innovative way of regarding the construction of race and racism and its effects on human interactions since the dawn of European colonization.

Kendi’s memoirist approach of committing a racist act and then analyzing the definition of the situation, allows him the credibility to operationalize his central theme, which is that “racist” is a useful term because it is descriptive, not pejorative. For example, after the Supreme Court rejected a recount bid in the 2000 Florida election where he was living, Kendi recalls blaming white people for an assault on the Black vote. Putting his antiracism into operation, he concluded that an antiracist cannot blame White people as a category but must see that the problem is only with those who embrace a racist idea, act on it, and then deny that their ideas and policies are racist (124-129).

Especially pernicious is a form of racism that racializes the body, ascribing it characteristics distinct from other bodies that are presumed normative. In his scrutiny of the various ways racism manifests in the human array, Kendi thus defines *bodily racist* as “One who is perceiving certain racialized bodies as more animal-like and violent than others, and *bodily antiracist* as one who is humanizing, deracializing, and individualizing nonviolent and violent behavior” (69).

Kendi concentrates on a particular aspect of the portrayal of the Black body in US dominant culture, and how that interpretation affects Black peoples’ interpretations. He relates incidents of youngsters he experienced growing up in Queens, New York, some of whom terrorized him, but he insists that this toughness is not a matter of race. He shows an unbroken line of animalistic interpretations of the Black body, from early British American colonists referring to enslaved Africans as “savages,” “beasts,” or as ruthless or evil, sometimes emphasizing their color as indicative of evil character. Those people, he reminds us, were

reacting violently or craftily to their inhumane treatment. These dehumanizing tropes persisted into the modern era when racist residential segregation created pockets of unemployment, poverty, and scarce opportunity and advancement.

Kendi relates examples of how Black middle-class folks adopt White attitudes toward active protesters, fearing other Black people. When American society denied equality, the resultant survival strategies of crime, substance abuse, and violence caught the attention of politicians who criminalized and imprisoned people rather than creating equitable policies and opportunities. He concentrates on the overreaction to crime, particularly during the Nixon, Reagan, and Clinton administrations when various “wars” on crime and drugs governed policy. To show the breadth of such attitudes, he demonstrates that though Nixon and Reagan were more ideologically callous toward the Black population, Democrat Clinton presided over the greatest disruptive initiative with his *Violent Crime and Law Enforcement Act*. Ironically, he was assisted by 26 of 38 members of the Black caucus in passing the bill that built new prisons, broadened capital offenses, introduced minimum sentencing, increased the number of police officers, militarized police forces, introduced three-strike laws, and dropped the age at which a person could be tried as an adult to 13. Clinton famously declared “Blacks must understand and acknowledge the roots of White fear in America... [so that] violence for these White people often has a Black face” (70). He summarizes the findings of a 2017 article in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* in which “Americans today see the Black body as larger, more threatening, more potentially harmful, and more likely to require force to control than a similarly sized White body” (71).

This was followed by Princeton political scientist and first director of George W. Bush’s Office of Faith Based and Community Initiatives John Dilulio’s characterization of “black inner-city males” as “super-predators.” Dilulio describes these youngsters in his 1995 article in the *Weekly Standard* as “tens of thousands of severely morally impoverished juvenile super-predators ... perfectly capable of committing the most heinous acts of physical violence for the most trivial reasons. Articles like this and laws and policies that did not address the roots of racism did much to vividly portray the dangers of the Black body, with little attention to the racism that caused it. Of this supposed cast of super-predators, Kendi offers his standard answer:

There is no such thing as a dangerous racial group. But there are of course, dangerous individuals.... [But, beneath it] is the violence of racism – manifest in policy and policing – that fears the Black body. And there is the nonviolence of antiracism that does not fear the Black body, that fears, if anything, the violence of racism that has been set on the Black body. (80)

Kendi then turns his attention to yet another form of racism. Black people who have fared relatively better in American society may see themselves as better than other African

Americans. He asks, “How was our criticism of Black people any different from the anti-Black criticism of White racist?” He reasons, “when I say something is wrong with Black people [by referring to them as the lowest of my race] ... I am being a racist” (140). He then poses this inconsistency: We [Blacks] do not place loud Black people, or negligent Black parents, criminals, or lazy people into interracial categories of loud, negligent, criminal, or lazy people. Instead, he contends, Blacks as well as Whites tend to refer to them as loud, negligent, or lazy *Black* people.

Blacks, too, can create a group identity of a certain types of Black person and then create a hierarchy “as all race-making does,” he writes (138). This brings Kendi to the question with which nearly every sociologist has wrestled: can Black Americans and every other disempowered minority population be racist? While many would say that one needs power to be a racist, Kendi’s strong, sparse definition of racist/racism holds that is not true. No group of people are inferior or superior to others based on race, so a Black person who has racist ideas and engages in actions or expressions toward another group or toward a segment within his or her own racial category is thereby racist.

Saying ‘Black people can’t be racist’ reproduces the false duality of racist and not-racist promoted by White racists to deny their racism ... who want to express their racist policies while identifying as not-racist no matter what they say or do. By this theory, Black people can hate those [folks], value Light people over Dark people, support anti-Latinx immigrant policies, defend the anti-Latinx immigration policies, [or] defend the anti-Native team mascots ... and still escape charges of racism. (144)

Kendi also challenges the notion that Black people cannot be racist because they do not have power to impose policies on others. Calling this the “powerless defense” (140), he argues that, though limited, Blacks do have some power.

White power controls the United States,” “But not absolutely.... [T]he only way White power can gain full control is by convincing us that White people already have all the power. If we accept ... that idea ..., we will fall under the sort of mind control that will ... rob us of any power to resist. (142)

However, one is not doomed to racism. “‘Racist’ and ‘antiracist’ are like peelable name tags that are placed and replaced based on what one is doing or not doing, supporting, or expressing in each moment” (23).

Kendi also calls attention to racialized space, and under his definition of racism, has an interesting view of space. He defines *Space racism* as “a powerful collection of racist policies that lead to resource inequity between racialized spaces or the

elimination of certain racialized spaces that are substantiated by racist ideas about racialized spaces” (166).

As an eminent example, Kendi recounts the meeting on January 12 and 15, when Union General William T. Sherman and the US Secretary of War, Edwin Stanton conferred with Rev. Garrison Frazier and nineteen other Black ministers. The delegation immediately asked for land so “we can be free and reap the fruits of our labor and take care of ourselves” (174). They said they preferred to live by themselves rather than among White planters. In Frazier’s words, “there is prejudice against us in the South that will take years for us to get over” (174).

By Special Field Order 15, General Sherman granted 400,000 acres on the coastal plains and sea islands of South Carolina and Georgia. Kendi interprets this as a clear choice by freed slaves, showing that the “antiracist desire to separate from racists is different from segregationists’ desire to separate from [whom Whites regarded as] inferior Blacks” (175).

In another example of racializing space, he contends that abolitionists’ assumption that Blacks would benefit “morally and educationally” from mingling with Whites is not true. For this group of twenty freed pastors, separation from White racism was true freedom. In fact, within six months of the agreement, 40,000 Black Americans took up the offer—most, only to be expelled a few months later, when President Andrew Johnson’s administration began resettling the previous White owners.

Later, Kendi explains that, then and now, when Black people voluntarily separate from Whites, often it is to create spaces of cultural survival free from White hatred or control. Such is not the Black equivalent of White supremacy, which is based on an implied power and superiority. He transposes the position of these post-Civil War negotiators into the period of Jim Crow following *Plessy v. Ferguson’s* separate-but-equal ruling. That separation was involuntary, and ignored the fact that the institutions, services, and facilities were nowhere near equal when the *Plessy* provisions went into effect. He quotes statistics for spending on education in 1930 for White/Black students: in Alabama (\$37/\$7), Georgia (\$32/\$7), and South Carolina (\$53/\$5) (175). In the wake of the massive unevenness of the educational terrain, the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* case was settled. The debates and legislation that followed reflected the conclusion that racial separation had led to inferior education of Black students and that integration would solve that problem. In fact, that generally meant that Black students were bused into and out of white neighborhoods each day where they were often unwanted. Kendi’s point is that simply placing students in the same space with each other, without addressing the underlying cause of residential, commercial, and employment segregation, does not lead to equal outcomes if the

academic space is still racialized. “What ... made schools unequal [prior to integration] were the dramatically unequal resources, not the fact of separation” (176).

Indeed, Martin Luther King’s plea that people be not judged by the color of their skin was not intended to argue for a race-neutral America. Of King, Kendi writes:

[That] erases the actual King. He did not live to integrate Black spaces and culture into White oblivion.... [As] the child of a Black neighborhood, church, college, and organization, [he] lived to ensure equal access to public accommodations and equal resources for all racialized spaces... [This was] an antiracist strategy as culture-saving as his non-violence was body-saving. (179)

Kendi explains, “[W]hen we unchain ourselves from the space racism that deracializes, normalizes, and elevates elite White spaces, while doing the opposite to Black spaces, we will find good and bad, violence and nonviolence, in all spaces, no matter how poor or rich, Black or non-Black” (169).

If an antiracist society could understand that sort of “unchaining,” we may become closer, both spatially and politically. Kendi understands the importance of space. Especially when people are categorized as a race, the physical space in and with which they live is crucial. While current space and its freedom of use is important, it is also essential that space is not restricted racially by formal or informal policies. Freedom from racism implies that space is not involuntarily racialized. We may wonder how different the USA and all nations would be if Native, Black, and Hispanic people would have had equal access to land, urban neighborhoods, and urban real estate.

The association between freedom and spatial openness surely is not only figurative, but creational. Openness in thought, trust, and love would reduce the narrowness of categorization and exclusion.

Conclusion

At this time in North American history, as the outside world increases in complexity, as our limitations grip us even tighter, and as our internal unity is compromised by narrow interest and ethnocentrism, Kendi’s work is crucial. He joins many others who have grasped the tragedy of public displays of White vs. Black interactions, disproportionate police killings of Black men, the rise of demonstrations and protest movements such as Black Lives Matter, public looting, and storming buildings like the US Capitol. Ibram X. Kendi digs deep for solutions. His is a powerful voice in that struggle. His articulation of historical and documented continuation of America’s race division are urgent. His stark contention that no American can be neutral regarding racial equity rings true. One is either against the obvious racial

inequity or supportive of it, either antiracist or racist. That is Ibram X. Kendi. Live into the ideas, rationalizations, and policies. Act. Let this book help you consider which side of the fence you are on.

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