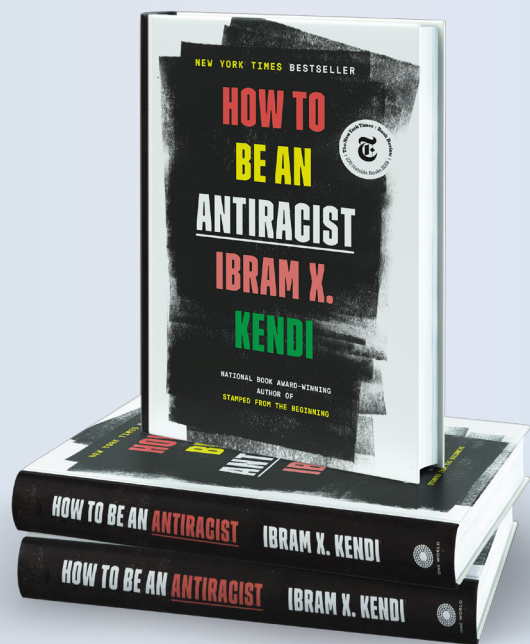


BOOK SNAPS™

Zooming In On Your Next Read



How to Be an Antiracist

by Ibram X. Kendi

Ibram X. Kendi is one of America's foremost historians and leading antiracist voices. He is a National Book Award-winning and #1 *New York Times* bestselling author. *How to Be an Antiracist* is his third book. His fourth book, *Stamped: Racism, Antiracism, and You* written with Jason Reynolds, is also a #1 *New York Times* bestseller. Kendi is the Andrew W. Mellon Professor in the Humanities and the Founding Director of the Boston University Center for Antiracist Research. He is a contributor writer at *The Atlantic* and a CBS News correspondent. Kendi is also the 2020-2021 Frances B. Cashin Fellow at the Radcliffe Institute for the Advanced Study at Harvard University. In 2019, Ibram X. Kendi was awarded the prestigious Guggenheim Fellowship. www.ibramxkendi.com

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The Radical Choice We All Must Understand

On January 17, 2000, standing on a stage before a largely Black audience, a high schooler delivered a powerful speech in the final round of the Prince William County Martin Luther King, Jr. Day oratorical contest. Today, as a *New York Times* bestselling author, professor of history and international relations, public speaker, and founding director of the Antiracist Research and Policy Center at American University, Ibram X. Kendi reflects on the racist speech he gave that day with shame.

It was well received; the audience spurred him on with appreciative applause. But, Kendi now says, it was filled with “unproven and disproven racist ideas about all the things wrong with Black youth, ironically, on the day when all the things right about Black youth were on display.” At the time, he says he wasn’t cognizant of the fact that “to say something is *wrong* about a racial group is to say something is *inferior* about a racial group.” Further, “to say something is *inferior* about a racial group is to say a *racist idea*.”

Kendi realizes now that his own “internalized racism” led him to believe Black people themselves were the problem, not “the policies that ensnared them.”

How to Be an Antiracist teaches readers to recognize and face the racist ideas ingrained within themselves and to find the “roots of problems in power and policies,” not in people. To achieve true racial equity in our nation, we must identify the problems in policy and push for actively antiracist policies that move the needle. It starts with each of us, individually.

Kendi acknowledges that he used to say and do things that were racist most of the time. But he is changing, and so can we all.

Definitions to Clarify Understanding

Language is ever evolving. In order to fully comprehend the case Kendi makes for embracing antiracism as the desired path forward, it is critical to establish the meanings of terms frequently found in the text.

Racist is defined as “one who is supporting a racist policy through their actions or inaction or expressing a racist idea.”



An **antiracist** is “one who is supporting an antiracist policy through their actions or expressing an antiracist idea.” As is the standard throughout Kendi’s book, the focus is on policy and ideas, not some irreversible quality of a person individually or the people themselves that make up any particular racial group.

In order to understand what racism is, we must first discuss the concepts of racist policies, racist ideas, and racial inequity. To define **racial inequity**, Kendi provides a clear example. “In 2014, 71% of White families lived in owner-occupied homes, compared to 45% of Latinx families and 41% of Black families.” If there were a roughly equal percentage of home ownership among these three racial groups, there would be racial equity. As it stands, this is a real-world example of racial inequity.

“Any measure that produces or sustains racial inequity between racial groups” is a **racist policy**. Policy includes “written and unwritten laws, rules, procedures, processes, regulations, and guidelines that govern people.” Linking to the example of home ownership, decades of racist policies have created the gaps between Whites and Latinx and White and Blacks in property ownership. Here Kendi points out that the terms “institutional racism” and “systemic racism” are commonly used to describe this gap. He prefers using “racist policy” for its ability to pinpoint exactly what and where the problem lies. It is not vague like the more popularized terms.

Kendi defines a **racist idea** as “any idea that suggests one racial group is inferior or superior to another racial group in any way.” He shares a quote from one of our founding fathers to hammer home the definition. The quote is a reflection of long-held beliefs that still permeate the consciousness of our society. About a decade after writing the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson said, “The blacks, whether originally a distinct race, or made distinct by time and circumstances, are inferior to the whites in the endowments of body and mind.” Many such racist ideas are quilted into the fabric of our society from our earliest beginnings on and they serve as a foundation for the racist ideas that are sustained today.

To combat this ongoing struggle in our society, Kendi urges we must move towards antiracist policies and antiracist ideas. **Racism** is the result of “a powerful collection of racist policies that lead to racial inequity and are substantiated by racist ideas. **Antiracism** is the exact opposite. Backed by antiracist ideas, antiracist policies lead to racial equity. Having a firm understanding of racism and antiracism allows us to recognize and “make sense of the racialized world around us.” Only then can we move forward with meaningful change.

What Side of History Will We Stand On?

Whether we endeavor to acknowledge it or not, racial inequity is all around us. It takes the shape of laws in plain sight and hides from the world inside our “private thoughts.” The good news is, these inequities are changeable. Kendi says that “racist” and “antiracist” are “not permanent tattoos.” They are more like “peelable name tags” that can be worn or taken off depending on the actions of a particular person. We are not born this

way. We do not become this way. “We can only strive to be one or the other” in every thought we have, every word we speak, and every action we take.

Being antiracist, Kendi asserts, is tantamount to fighting an addiction. It “requires persistent self-awareness, constant self-criticism, and regular self-examination.” We must decide “what side of history we will stand on.” Being an antiracist is a “radical choice,” when compared to the ingrained, normalized patterns of racist ideas of our history. We must engage in a “radical reorientation of our consciousness” to be an antiracist. Each of us must make this radical choice to move our country in the right direction and get on the right side of history in this moment.

The Duel Within

Assimilationist ideas and segregationist ideas are two types of dueling consciousness racist ideas, we learn from Kendi.

An *assimilationist* is “one who believes the racist idea that a racial group is culturally or behaviorally inferior and is supporting cultural or behavioral enrichment programs to develop that racial group.” The belief is that one group should rise to the level of an assumed-superior racial group. Typically, White people are positioned as the “superior standard.”

Segregationists similarly believe that racial groups are inherently superior or inferior, however the belief here is that one or the other is “permanently inferior” and “can never be developed.” Therefore, segregationists support policies that keep racial groups separated from each other.

An *antiracist* promotes ideas that “racial groups are equals,” “that none needs developing,” and therefore, supports “policy that reduces racial inequity.” This focus on policy over people is a difficult shift for most Americans. We have been trained over time to “see the deficiencies in people rather than policy.”

People are all around us, present in our daily lives. Policies are “distant” and intangible. This makes it easier for us to point at people over the more-elusive idea of policy and policy making. Americans are especially blind to “seeing the policies lurking behind the struggles of people.” Kendi emphasizes that opening our minds and giving attention to the connection between policy and inequity is a critical component to affecting change in our society’s racism struggle.

The Foundations of Racist Ideas

Kendi’s devotes chapters to explain a variety of differences we can perceive between racial groups that “create a hierarchy of value” and therefore, lay the foundation for racist ideas. Kendi acknowledges that differences do exist between differing racial groups, but those differences are not better or worse. The problem is the hierarchy of value placed on them. To move from racist to antiracist, a person must understand and extinguish racism that is based on a hierarchy that has been established related to biology, ethnicity, body, culture, behavior, color, class, and space.

A biological racist believes that people of different racial groups



All individuals are susceptible to making irresponsible choices. However, the failures that result from those choices shouldn't 'tarnish' the entire racial group. . .

are biologically different and that those differences are inferior or superior when compared to each other. A biological antiracist promotes the idea that all racial groups are the same from a biological standpoint and that “there are no genetic racial differences.” This is one of the racist ideas that is “widely held” and that “few people realize they hold.” For example, holding the belief that Black people have more natural athletic ability than White people is a biologically racist idea.

A bodily racist perceives “certain racialized bodies as more animal-like and violent than others.” A bodily antiracist looks at violent or nonviolent behavior on the individual level, having nothing to do with race. This form of racism has historical roots to seeing Black people as “beasts.” Research has shown that today, Americans who hold this racist idea see Black bodies as being “larger, more threatening, more potentially harmful, and more likely to require force to control” than comparative White bodies.

Cultural racists “create a cultural standard and impose a cultural hierarchy” between different racial groups. To demonstrate this type of racism, Kendi points to Ebonics, a term for the distinct language used within Black culture. Both languages have grown from the other root languages. English stemmed from German and Ebonics from modern English. However, modern English is considered proper and Ebonics is considered broken English.” Kendi says that the hierarchy is made clear by the fact that English is not likewise considered “broken German.”

Behavioral racism occurs when someone’s individual behavior is attributed to being part of a particular racial group and further, that the “racial group is responsible for the behavior of individuals.” All individuals are susceptible to making irresponsible choices. However, the failures that result from those choices shouldn’t “tarnish” the entire racial group of which that individual happens to belong. The “White screwup is handed second chances and empathy.” The Black screwup “faces the abyss after one error.”

Colorism refers to the group of racist policies that lead to inequity “between Light and Dark people” within the same racial group. Kendi points out that within any racial group, there are variations of color. Colorism occurs when the Light people within a group experience greater gains in comparison to the Dark people in that same group. Examples supported by research include favoritism from White people for lighter-skinned politicians, income disparities between Light and Dark members of the same race, and the preference in hiring Light people over Dark people, “regardless of qualifications.”

Class racism refers to the “policies of racial capitalism” against particular race-classes. There are nearly countless combinations of race-classes. They are groups formed by the “intersection of

race and class.” Poor and elite are classes. Black and White are races. Poor White or Elite Black are race-classes. It is elitist to say that poor people are lazy. Believing Black people are lazy is a racist idea. Class racism is formed when we say, “Black poor people are lazier than White poor people, White elites, and Black elites.” “White trash” is a class-racist label used frequently by White people towards White poor people.

Space racism “normalizes and elevates elite White spaces, while doing the opposite to Black spaces.” One of many examples provided refers to violent crime. Black neighborhoods are “stigmatized as places of homicide and mortal violence” while White neighborhoods are not similarly connected to “the disproportionate number of White males who engage in mass shootings.” Kendi says that we must disconnect ourselves from space racism to understand that “we will find good and bad, violence and nonviolence, in all spaces” regardless of the richness or poorness, Blackness or Whiteness of the inhabitants.

At the core of Kendi’s book is the point that a person, policy, or belief cannot be “not racist.” We hear the words, “I am not a racist,” from the mouths of countless, mostly well-meaning individuals. This notion of color blindness, Kendi asserts, is a major part of the problem. What’s wrong with being “not racist”? It signifies neutrality. His book circles back again and again to this point. It is not enough to remain neutral. Instead of passively labeling oneself as “not racist” we have to snuff out and abolish policies that are racist and replace them with those that are actively antiracist. He says, “We know how to be racist. We know how to pretend to be not racist. Now let’s know how to be antiracist.” This requires taking a hard, sometimes painful, look in the mirror.

Part memoir, part political guide, *How to Be an Antiracist* leads readers through a series of personal accounts from early childhood through adulthood that illustrate and illuminate Kendi’s own racist ideas and actions. Kendi’s retrospection gives readers a firmer grasp of the racist ideas lurking within us all and stokes the fires of courage for each individual to face their own. Kendi’s hypotheses are tied to his own personal and myriad historical accounts that show how we’ve failed to achieve equity among racial groups in our country. Kendi encourages us to view our own racism in the mirrors of our past and present and view antiracism in the mirror of our future. Readers may long for more advice on what one can do to affect change in this positive direction. For now, Kendi calls us to change our thinking and push for actively antiracist policy changes at every level of government. We are at a pivotal point in the ongoing fight for racial equity in our country. Anyone seeking to understand the full historical picture and forge a progressive path forward will benefit from fully digesting and reflecting upon the powerfully personal writing of Ibram X. Kendi in *How to Be an Antiracist*.