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Quatez Scott

The University of Toledo, quatezscott@gmail.com

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| **BOOK REVIEW** |

How to Be an Antiracist

by Ibram X. Kendi (2019).
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Quatez Scott
The University of Toledo

In *How to be an Antiracist* (2019), historian and race expert, Ibram X. Kendi, explores race relations from both historical and personal perspectives in order to illustrate not only how racist policies nurture racist ideas in the U.S., but how racist ideas and policies become internalized by individuals of all races. Racist policies (also known as “systemic racism,” “institutional racism,” etc.) create and maintain racial inequities among human beings, which produces written and unwritten rules that govern racial groups (p.18). Racist policies safeguard ideas that racial groups are inferior or superior to other racial groups (p. 20). Kendi compellingly argues that to dismantle racist ideas and racist policies, these ideas and policies must be identified, accurately described, and then nullified (p. 9) using antiracist perspectives. *How to be an Antiracist* is relevant for all persons seeking to engage in dialogues on race and racism and serves as a handbook on antiracist frameworks for organizations and educators aiming to disrupt racial inequities by closing opportunity gaps at all levels of the institution.

Antiracist consists of 18 chapters dedicated to identifying the historical roots of racist ideas, while introducing antiracist concepts that serve to disrupt racist policies. The first chapter provides basic definitions that guide this text, including racist, antiracist, racist ideas, and racist policies (p.18). A racist supports “a racist policy through their actions or inaction or expressing a racist idea” while an antiracist supports “antiracist policy through their actions or expressing an antiracist idea” (p.13). Careful attention should be given to the word “support” as Kendi identifies support (of actions, policies, and individuals) as another form of anti/racist action. In chapter 2, Kendi distinguishes between the dueling consciousness of people of color (POC) and white dueling consciousness. He grounds his argument in Du Bois’ *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) in stating Blacks develop a “double consciousness” through the twoness of seeing oneself as both Black and American. Kendi asserts it is actually a duel because Blacks battle with the mental war between assimilation (looking at oneself through white eyes) and antiracist (the racial relativity of looking at one’s race through their own eyes) (p.29). Conversely, white dueling consciousness promotes racist ideas of cultural assimilation for “civilizing” POCs or segregation (p.32).

In chapter 3, Kendi explores racist power while defining race as a construct aimed to produce different outcomes for different racial groups (p. 37). As he repeats throughout the book, those who build the racial system will position themselves at the top. A broader understanding of race history in the U.S. informs readers how certain racial groups have historically gained more social and economic resources than others, thus extending their power and privilege. This highlights the importance of race history extending beyond slavery to encompass the science and psychologies used to rationalize beliefs of inferiority and superiority of racial groups. These teachings help debunk biological racist ideas that “races are meaningfully different in their biology and that these differences create a hierarchy of value” (p. 45). Later, in chapter five, Kendi discusses the antiracist ideology of national and transnational ethnic groups, which views all race groups as equals and identifies problems of social outcomes in policy rather than race (p. 64).

Chapters 6 through 8 focus on racial fallacies—namely in the Black and Latinx communities. A systemically racist idea is that Black and Brown folx are prone to violence and crime. In actuality, violence and crime have greater statistical linkages to unemployment that is consistent across racial categories (p.79). How these bodies are represented by politicians, the media, etc. play a critical role in the production of racial policies and ideas. This is how communities of color become stigmatized and racialized, which are racist acts (p.90). A notable quote here is that “individual behaviors can shape the success of individuals. But policies determine the success of groups” (p. 94). These are important ideas for educators to consider when structuring social spaces, classrooms and being critical of the ways we engage students of color. Written and unwritten racialized policies matter to the success of groups—specifically groups of color.

Chapters 9 through 11 (entitled “Color,” “White,” and “Black,” respectively) observe racial inequities through color lines and address how race becomes internalized. Those who have been victimized by race continue to be victimized by owners of racial policies. Whites blame Blacks for racial inequities with little regard for the deep history of racist policies. Blacks, at times, have also betrayed their community when seated in positions of social authority. These chapters highlight both the relevance of racial power and the limitations of power. Specifically, power is not always reflective of resources, but reflective of what one is able to accomplish. Contrary to the belief that Black people do not have power, Kendi makes the argument that Black people have exerted power and influence over time that has created significant social changes, even if limited. In chapter 13, “Space,” Kendi argues against perceptions of what Black and Indigenous people of color (BIPOCs) value less in comparison to their white counterparts (for example, education, health, etc.). He attributes those disparities to the lack of equitable access to resources—the result of exclusionary racial policies.

Kendi openly addresses his personal journey in learning about the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality in graduate school. While racism continues to be experienced by individuals in communities of color, BIPOC women and those who are members of the LGBTQ+ community are often most vulnerable. Kendi acknowledges that his own journey is ongoing and ever-developing (as it should be for all of us). However, he makes it clear that in order to be a true antiracist, one must strive to resolve all of the areas in which racial inequities exist—and the health and safety of Black women and Black LGBTQ+ members are areas of utmost concern.

The final chapters (16-18), entitled “Failure,” “Success,” and “Survival” explore the difficult challenges of being an antiracist. Kendi states:

The antiracist power within is the ability to view my own racism in the mirror of my past and present, view my own antiracism in the mirror of my future, view my own racial groups as equal to other racial groups, view the world of racial inequity as abnormal, view my own power to resist and overtake racist power and policy. (p. 215)

Kendi uses “powerful” as a descriptor throughout his various definitions of racist and antiracist concepts. His repeated usage of the word makes it clear that racist actions and ideas which are ignored or dismissed serve to reinforce and bolster institutional racist policies. When such concepts and behaviors persist, institutions fail to bridge opportunity gaps among racial groups. Kendi’s grounding of racist policies and ideas within relevant historical narratives can serve to guide organizations and educators in tracing back just how internalized and normative racist policies have become. These historical narratives build critical connections that other social perspectives may not always convey. In order to move forward, antiracists must be unrelenting in their pursuit of racial equity through the deconstruction of racist policies and implicit beliefs. Only then can racial equity be achieved in all social and educational spheres.

References

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Author

Quatez Scott is a Ph.D. candidate in The University of Toledo's Social and Philosophical Foundations of Education program. He also minors in Educational Psychology. Scott's research examines student and political movements, the history of African American schooling, and diversity leadership in higher education. He holds a graduate certificate from The University of Toledo in Foundations of Peace, a Master's degree from Eastern Michigan University in Educational Leadership, and a bachelor's degree from Wilmington College in Communication Arts.