

IJIDI: Book Review

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How can I be an ally? What can I do to support my racialized colleagues or communities that we serve? These are questions often asked by non-racialized information professionals when discussing diversity and equity issues in libraries, especially after the recent racial violence and injustices involving police and the murder of Black men and women, and recent anti-Asian attacks during the coronavirus pandemic. What has emerged is now a collective consciousness of racial injustice, racial violence, anti-Black and anti-Asian racism pervasive in the U.S.—and by extension similar Western countries—and the desire to “do something” to address this problem, this *dis-ease*. Hence, a resurgence of interest in anti-racist approaches and practices makes Kendi’s *How to be an Antiracist* a timely and important work.

Ibram X. Kendi, founding director of the Antiracist Research and Policy Center at American University, self-identifies as a Black man. He uses storytelling or narratives, a prominent feature in critical race theory, to explore his personal journey from what he self-describes as being a racist, to being an anti-racist. This is a very nuanced look at racism. Kendi outlines his “journey to being an antiracist [by] first recogniz[ing] the intersectionality of my ethnic racism, and then my bodily racism, and then my cultural racism, and then my color racism, and then my class racism, and when I entered graduate school, my gender racism and queer racism” (p. 192). In other words, becoming an anti-racist, is an ongoing and multi-layered process.

Through his working definitions of the different kinds of racism and anti-racism approaches, Kendi dissects race and various forms of racism and anti-racism within 18 themed chapters. At the beginning of each chapter, the juxtaposition of definitions related to the chapter’s focus are provided to introduce discussed concepts and, later, for easy reference while reading the chapter. Each chapter is a mix of personal life experience relevant to the chapter (to illustrate his journey from racist to anti-racist), with some relevant historical facts and references to important works and research, and statements on how to be anti-racist in relation to the chapter’s theme.

Kendi grounds his first chapter by defining a “racist” as “one who is supporting a racist policy through their actions or inaction, or expressing a racist idea” (p. 14). This provocative definition of a racist has far reaching implications as it indicates that we are all culpable (whether we self-identify as Black, White, etc.) and that we are all racists if we do not actively work to dismantle racist policies and ideas. This definition is counterintuitive to more conventional definitions of racism which tend to link White supremacy to racism. For example, in the U.S., Whites’ greater wealth of social, political, and economic power, is tied into the idea of what a racist is, which is

often tied to an assumption of hegemony. However, Kendi provides ample examples of racist ideas that he himself once held and witnessed from family members and friends throughout his life. In fact, Chapter 10 (“White”) tackles anti-White racism (“classifying people of European descent as biologically, culturally, or behaviorally inferior or conflating the entire race of White people with racist power” (p. 122). Readers will either find this work palatable or off-putting because it does not absolve any one group of being racist.

Chapter 2 (“Dueling Consciousness”) offers a framework for understanding the different types of racist ideas by using a continuum of racist to anti-racist ideas:

- 1) Segregationist: “one who is expressing their racist idea that a permanently inferior racial group can never be developed and is supporting policy that segregates away that racial group” (p. 25), and
- 2) Assimilationist: “one who is expressing 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” (p. 25).

We see these underlying ideas show up in the programs, policies, and procedures throughout society, including libraries, archives, and other information-focused institutions. Good intentions, often enacted in the library and information science (LIS) field, are often based on these assimilationist views. “Assimilationists believe that people of color can, in fact, be developed, become fully human, just like White people” (p.31). The diversity problem in LIS is usually framed as the lack of ethnically and racially diverse librarians, archivists, and information professionals. For example, when a job candidate of color needs to conceal their natural authentic selves (how they talk, act, and really think) to get hired, it is because of assimilationist racist ideas, programs, and policies rooted in whiteness. It is well for readers to be reminded that assimilationism, though a more sanitized, less overt version of racist ideas, is still a racist perspective. In order for us to move from racist ideas to anti-racist action it is first important to distinguish between assimilationism and anti-racism.

But what is an anti-racist? Kendi offers a definition of an anti-racist person that is parallel to his definition of a racist: “one who is supporting an antiracist policy through their actions or expressing an antiracist idea” (p. 14). Readers who believe that racist ideas came before racist policies will be surprised with Kendi’s assertion that “when someone discriminates against a person in a racial group, they are carrying out a policy or taking advantage of the lack of a protective policy” (p. 19). The focus on racist policy and racist policymakers (the few with the power to enact policy) rather than racial discrimination is the heart of how to be an anti-racist.

While Kendi uses a lot of narratives and examples to illustrate both racist thoughts and the relative anti-racist approach, the lack of enough explicit recommendations on how to take action to be an anti-racist is one of the book’s weaknesses. Although examples of anti-racist approaches are peppered throughout the chapters, I wished that the author had focused more on examples of taking actions against anti-racist policies which are a crucial part of his working definition of being racist/anti-racist. Chapter 17 (“Success”) does offer a handful of examples from his experience, such as “seizing a policymaking position, joining an anti-racist organization or protest ... [p]ublicly donating my time or privately donating my funds to anti-racist policymakers, organizations, and protests fixated on changing power and policy” (p. 226); it does not feel like enough for a book with such an impactful title. But perhaps it is a symptom of our culture that

we want immediate answers (“how to”s) to solve problems. Nonetheless, what Kendi provides is a good introduction to the nuances of racism and its anti-racism counterpart.

I liked Kendi’s dislike of the term “microaggression” and his refusal to use this sanitized term as it minimizes the damaging effects on people (“distress, anger, worry, depression, anxiety, pain, fatigue, and suicide” (p. 47)). “Racist abuse”, instead, is the term used to highlight the racial violence (death by a thousand cuts) regularly experienced by racialized people. Only zero-tolerance policies will prevent and punish racist abusers (p. 47).

This book is based on Kendi’s experience as an African American cis gender male, middle classed academic. As such, the text does not explore in much detail the intersections of other identities such as ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, dis/ability and social class from those respective experiences. Nonetheless, Kendi does explore *his* experience with some of these intersections through the chapters on “gender” (gender racism and gender anti-racism), “sexuality” (queer racism and queer anti-racism) and “ethnicity” (ethnic racism and ethnic anti-racism), but these are through his lens.

This book helps the reader understand the different permutations of racism (from behavioral racism, spatial racism, colorism, and classist racism) in our society and what they look like to understand what the antithesis of these racist thoughts and actions are. Kendi’s work is very accessible to both academic and lay readers and is not considered an excessive scholarly treatment of race, racism, and anti-racism. This is quite welcome as the absence of parenthetical citations to interrupt reading flow makes this work an easy and enjoyable read. Instead, an extensive list of references and citations, organized by chapter, are provided at the end of the book.

To be anti-racist, an understanding of the different types of racism enacted in society and the various permutations is first needed. While *How to be an Antiracist* does not focus on galleries, libraries, archives, and museums (GLAMs), it does offer the potential for international readers to understand the subtle nuances of racist ideas, which on the surface may appear to be innocuous, but when examined using Kendi’s definitions and detailed explanations, are revealed for the racist ideas they are.

An important message, taken from Kendi’s journey, is that you will make mistakes on this journey. A person on their journey to being anti-racist will make mistakes and struggle, as Kendi does point out his own racist mistakes and assumptions (see Chapter 16, “Failure”). A fear of failure is a very real barrier to anti-racist work. Readers will feel reassured with Kendi’s view that being racist and anti-racist is not a fixed state, and that “what we say about race, what we do about race, in each moment determines what—not who—we are” (p. 10).

After reading this work, White allies will be challenged to think about why they want to be allies. If it is to not be racist, then Kendi finds this problematic. True allyship means doing the work (learning from a book such as this) and striving to be anti-racist, not just to be not racist. This book will challenge all readers to re-examine their understanding of race, racism, and anti-racism, but ultimately to identify and recognize racist ideas, racial inequity, and racial policies in order to challenge said policies. This book is highly recommended for all to read and to acquire for their library collection.

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