How to Be an Antiracist

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF IBRAM X. KENDI

As he recounts in *How to Be an Antiracist*, Ibram X. Kendi was born and raised in Queens, New York. After feeling ostracized in Christian private schools for many years, he attended John Bowne High School in Queens before moving to Virginia with his family, where he graduated from Stonewall Jackson High School (now Unity Reed High School). Although he was an average student and mostly cared about basketball during high school, Kendi went on to study African American Studies and Magazine Production at Florida A&M University, then earn his PhD in African American Studies from Temple University in 2010. He taught in the State University of New York system for seven years before taking appointments at Brown University and the University of Florida. In 2016, at age 34, Kendi became the youngest winner of the National Book Award for Nonfiction for his second book, *Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America*. However, as he explains in *How to Be an Antiracist*, while writing *Stamped from the Beginning* Kendi realized that his fundamental assumptions about the nature of racist ideas were wrong: racist ideas do not cause people to support racist policies; rather, people adopt racist ideas in order to defend racist policies that they choose for self-interested reasons. This realization led him to begin working on policy issues, including by founding the Antiracist Research and Policy Center at American University, where he taught from 2017–2020. But in early 2018, he was diagnosed with late-stage colon cancer and given only a 12% chance of survival. Miraculously, he beat the cancer, and in *How to Be an Antiracist* he uses this experience—as well as his wife's, mother's, and father's respective battles with cancer—as a metaphor for the American battle against racism. Kendi became a household name in the United States with the publication of *How to Be an Antiracist* in 2019; the book became a #1 *New York Times* Bestseller in 2020, during the nationwide wave of antiracist protests in the wake of the murder of George Floyd by the Minneapolis police. As of mid-2020, Kendi is moving to Boston University, where he is establishing the Boston University Center for Antiracist Research and planning to spend 2020–2021 as a fellow at the Radcliffe Institute at Harvard University.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In his analysis of racism's origins and varied manifestations, Kendi frequently references the more than 500 years of history. The concept of race is essentially modern, and was first developed in the 15th century, just before the beginning of the transatlantic slave trade and the conquest of the Americas. These processes of enslavement and conquest also birthed modern capitalism—like virtually all racist policies, slavery and colonialism were primarily motivated by profit. In this era, constructed ideas of racial difference were justification for forcing non-white groups of people to work, die, or give up their land for Europeans' benefit. Kendi also explores the ideologies about race that drove debates around slavery and abolition during the 19th century. He points out that many people who firmly rejected slavery nevertheless pushed racist ideas, like the assimilationist belief that white people needed to teach Black people to be civilized, if they were to coexist in the same society. However, Kendi's book primarily focuses on American racism and antiracism since the civil rights movement of the 1960s, which he views as an important but insufficient step towards racial equity. His own research and theory are rooted in the explosion of Black political activism in the 1960s and 1970s, both in universities and in the streets. He points out how Martin Luther King Jr.'s anticapitalism and focus on building power in the Black community are often forgotten today, and he addresses the contributions of scholars like Kwame Toure, Angela Davis, and Kimberlé Crenshaw, who developed new ways of assessing and responding to racism. At the same time, he also points out how racism became more sinister and effective—particularly through the "war on drugs" of the 1980s and 1990s, as well as the incarceration and political disenfranchisement it accelerated. While antiracists make progress throughout history, Kendi insists, so do racists. He emphasizes that the future is uncertain and in our hands. This book has become wildly popular and taken on a new sense of urgency in 2020, with the formation of a national protest movement for racial justice and equity in the United States. Although it initially emerged in response to the police murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis, this movement builds on years of organizing work from organizations like Black Lives Matter and the Equal Justice Initiative. Similarly, the inequities it protests have been around for centuries and sustained by a series of racist policies throughout all of American history.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

How to Be an Antiracist is an introduction to the history and workings of racism, so Kendi strongly encourages interested readers to dig deeper into the extensive literature on racial inequality in the United States. As a comprehensive introduction to contemporary scientific racism and the political context surrounding it, he strongly recommends Dorothy Roberts's *Fatal Invention: How Science, Politics, and Big Business Re-create Race in the Twenty-First Century* (2011). After gaining a basic vocabulary for understanding race and racism, Kendi

suggests that readers check out memoirs like *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1965) and essay collections like James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time* (1963) or Audre Lorde's *Sister Outsider* (1984). Having eased themselves into empirical questions, readers can turn to well-researched scholarly work on their specific areas of interest. For instance, Kendi recommends Cedric J. Robinson's *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (1983) for readers interested in racial capitalism. He suggests that readers committed to antiracist feminism check out the anthology *How We Get Free: Black Feminism and the Combahee River Collective* (2017). And for readers interested in mass incarceration, Kendi recommends books like Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (2010), Angela Davis's *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (2003), and James Forman Jr.'s *Locking Up Our Own: Crime and Punishment in Black America* (2017). Before *How to Be an Antiracist*, Kendi's first two books were the W.E.B. DuBois Book Prize winning *The Black Campus Movement: Black Students and the Racial Reconstitution of Higher Education, 1965-1972* (2012) and the National Book Award winning *Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America* (2016). In response to his work's sudden surge in popularity during 2020, Kendi has published two more books: *STAMPED: Racism, Antiracism, and You*, which he wrote in collaboration with Jason Reynolds and is aimed at young adults, and *Antiracist Baby*, which is designed to facilitate conversations between parents and their young children, in response to research showing that babies often internalize racist ideas as early as two years old.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** How to Be an Antiracist
- **When Written:** 2016–2019
- **Where Written:** Florida and Washington, D.C.
- **When Published:** August 2019
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary Nonfiction
- **Genre:** Popular Nonfiction, American History and Politics, Memoir, Self-Improvement
- **Setting:** Queens, New York; Manassas, Virginia; Tallahassee, Florida; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; Oneonta, New York; Providence, Rhode Island; Washington, D.C.
- **Climax:** In college and his early years as a professor, Kendi realizes that racism and antiracist activism must focus specifically on changing policy, rather than education and public outreach.
- **Antagonist:** Racial inequity; racist power, policies, and ideas
- **Point of View:** First Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Antiracist Renaming. In *How to Be an Antiracist*, Kendi recalls ambivalently moving to Virginia to attend Stonewall Jackson High School, whose namesake was a racist Confederate general in the Civil War. During the 2020 antiracist protest movement inspired by the murder of George Floyd, public opinion turned sharply towards renaming the school, and a widely circulated petition with tens of thousands of signatures suggested that the school be renamed Ibram X. Kendi High School. (The school administration was reluctant to name the school after a living person, so instead renamed it Unity Reed High School.)

PLOT SUMMARY

In *How to Be an Antiracist*, Dr. Ibram X. Kendi presents a theory of antiracism, a system of ideas and policies that fight racial inequity. As teenager, Kendi gave a public speech full of stereotypes about young Black people like himself. Although the audience loved it, Kendi now understands how misguided he was: he blamed *people* for racial inequities that were really caused by *policy*. In turn, he implied that Black people—including himself—were inherently inferior to other groups. This kind of thinking is the essence of racism.

Kendi argues that there's no such thing as being "not racist"—a person is either racist or actively antiracist. There's no neutral middle ground between equality and inequality. Virtually everyone believes in some racist ideas, and racism is not always conscious. But it's also not inevitable: people can always unlearn their racism and become antiracist. Kendi uses himself as an example: he was an anti-Black racist, then an anti-white racist, before he finally became an antiracist. Kendi defines racism as a system comprised of three main components: racial inequities; the racist policies that create these inequities; and the racist ideas that justify these policies. In contrast, antiracism is a set of antiracist policies, justified by antiracist ideas, that produces racial equity.

Next, Kendi compares antiracism to segregationism and assimilationism, two common political stances that have failed to produce racial equity. Segregationists believe that racial groups should be divided because some are inherently superior to others. Assimilationists agree that certain groups are superior to others but think that inferior groups can be improved if they become more like the dominant group. When it comes to race, Kendi argues that most Americans face what he calls dueling consciousness: Black Americans get stuck between assimilationism and antiracism, while white Americans often struggle to choose between segregationism and assimilationism. Kendi then looks at the history of race, which is not a real scientific category. Rather, it is a system of categorization that powerful people developed throughout history in order to divide and conquer other groups.

Kendi then outlines the main types of racist ideas: biological racism is the idea that there are meaningful biological

differences among different racial groups, and that these differences justify ranking different racial groups in a hierarchy of value. Ethnic racism is the belief that one ethnic group is superior to another. Bodily racism refers to attaching personality traits to certain races. Cultural racism is the idea that certain racial groups have inferior cultures. Finally, behavioral racism is the belief that racial groups have different behavior patterns.

Kendi goes on to explain how people of color can be racist. Colorism is racism that elevates light-skinned over dark-skinned people of the same race. Anti-white racism is the idea that white people are racially inferior to people of color. Finally, Black people reinforce anti-Black racism through the "powerless defense"—the idea that Black people can't be racist because they have no power. Kendi argues that all of these beliefs are misguided and counterproductive to antiracism.

Next, Kendi addresses class racism, which is the idea that racism and classism combine to oppress poor people of color. He touches on racial capitalism, which refers to the historical intertwining of racist and capitalist polices. Kendi then discusses space racism, or the racialization of spaces like neighborhoods or institutions. Kendi imagines an antiracist world in which every group has its own spaces, and everyone can participate in any of them.

Kendi then addresses the intersectionality between racism and sexism, homophobia, and transphobia. Intersectionality refers to the way that different forms of inequity work together: they are created by the same powerful, self-interested people and institutions, and they overlap. He concludes that all movements against all kinds of inequity must be linked.

Kendi ends the book by analyzing how antiracist activism can achieve social change. He emphasizes that racism comes from self-interest, not ignorance—which means that fighting it requires power, not just knowledge. In his concluding chapter, Kendi reveals that he, his mom, his dad, and his wife Sadiqa are all **cancer** survivors, and he uses their fight as a metaphor for America's fight against racism. He argues that antiracists have to understand that the odds are against them—but that they must hold onto compassion and hope. Otherwise, antiracists can never build a more just and equitable world.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Dr. Ibram X. Kendi – Dr. Ibram X. Kendi is the author of *How to Be an Antiracist* and central character of its numerous memoir sections. He is a renowned historian who studies racist policies, the racist ideas used to justify them, and the transformational processes that people can use to become antiracist and build a more racially equitable society. In this book, he traces his own personal history alongside the history of American racism in order to show how racism is grounded in the past but is still alive in the present. He also highlights how racism plays out in people's individual lives and in society as a whole. As he explores racism's varied manifestations and intersections with other forms of oppression, Kendi also explains how he has supported, contributed to, or encountered different forms of racism. This allows him to avoid adopting an accusatory tone and instead present antiracism as a process of positive personal and social transformation.

Kendi's Mother – A participant in the Second Great Migration, Kendi's mother moved from Georgia to New York in her childhood. Kendi's mother (like his father) came of age during the Black Power movement but followed social trends toward assimilationism in the 1980s and 1990s. Accordingly, she and Kendi's father raised their children with a mix of racist and antiracist ideas. For instance, they celebrated Black activists and political leaders throughout history, while worrying about Kendi damaging his chances in life by following "ghetto culture"—like by playing basketball. Kendi's mother was also a dedicated feminist in her youth: she participated in Black feminist discussion groups and insisting that the officiant change the sexist statement "wives [should] obey your husbands" in her wedding vows. Kendi's parents demonstrate Black America's dueling consciousness as it reckoned with the problem of racism throughout the second half of the 20th century. Growing up, Kendi understood the need to resolve racial inequities and believed in the fundamental equality of all racial groups, but he still thought the most straightforward path to equity would be through cultural assimilation, not policy change.

Kendi's Father – Kendi portrays his father as a wise, supportive parent, who was committed to building a more racially equitable world for his children but nevertheless made some mistakes along the way. He and Kendi's mother met through church and became involved in Black liberation theology and the Black Power movement in the 1970s. But they grew more conservative or assimilationist in the 1980s and 1990s, which reflects broader political trends in the United States as a whole. During this later period, they took comfortable corporate jobs rather than pursue the careers they really wanted in the Christian ministry and the arts. Kendi also portrays his father as supporting gender equity and the feminist movement, even if he was not fully committed to transforming traditional gender roles: Kendi's father stopped short of joining the Black Panthers and Nation of Islam because he saw misogyny in their ranks, and he supported his wife's involvement in Black feminist activism. Just like his mother's, Kendi's father's political thinking followed broader trends in Black America over the latter half of the 20th century and represents a dueling consciousness between antiracist and assimilationist ideas.

Donald Trump – Donald Trump is the 45th president of the United States, whose rhetoric and policies Kendi uses as

examples of racism. However, Kendi notes that Trump's ideas and policies are so overtly racist that many people criticize them in the hopes of seeming antiracist, while continuing to hold racist ideas and support racist policies.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. – Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was a famous minister, scholar, and activist who is widely remembered as the leader of the civil rights movement from 1955 until his assassination in 1968. While Dr. King is often viewed as an optimist who collaborated with the political establishment in the hopes of creating so-called "race-neutral" policies, Kendi argues that none of this is true, and that King's legacy has been severely distorted over the years. In reality, Dr. King emphasized that the history of racism is inevitably tied to the growth and spread of capitalism (racial capitalism). Moreover, King did not fully support the integration programs often done in his name because they tend to reinforce the space racist hierarchy that treats white social and institutional spaces as inherently superior to Black ones. And finally and most importantly, although Dr. King is often fondly remembered for Gandhi-inspired nonviolence and a belief in the fundamental goodness of human nature, in reality, he fully recognized that racism was about white people's self-interest and (like Gandhi) never believed that Black people would win civil rights in America simply because they changed people's minds. Rather, he recognized that racism is fundamentally about power and viewed nonviolent resistance as the most effective way to put pressure on racist power.

Ronald Reagan – Ronald Reagan was the 40th president of the United States, who served from 1981 to 1989. Kendi argues that Reagan's administration dramatically redistributed wealth and power towards the people who were already the wealthiest and most powerful in American society. Reagan implemented the most significant wave "tough on crime" policies that painted Black and Latinx people as criminals and began disproportionately incarcerating them for drug crimes, even though they use and sell drugs at the same rate as white people.

W. E. B. Du Bois – Du Bois was an influential scholar and activist who was the first Black American to earn a PhD and helped found the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1909. He remains best known for his classic 1903 book *The Souls of Black Folk*. Du Bois was one of the earliest and most astute theorists of many concepts central to contemporary scholarship on race and racism, including double consciousness (which Kendi calls dueling consciousness) and racial capitalism. But Kendi notes that Du Bois's thinking also evolved over time: for instance, he refused to believe in colorism for most of his life and tended to think that educating white people would stop racism. However, he changed his thinking in the 1930s and realized that racism is about power, not education, so most white people will not accept racial equity until it becomes in their self-interest to do so.

Smurf – Smurf is a kid at John Bowne Public High School in Queens who once pulled a gun on Kendi on the school bus and then attacked an Indian kid who unknowingly took his seat. In his chapter on bodily racism, Kendi argues that racists frequently use the existence of dangerous, violent people like Smurf to justify a generalized fear of and hostility towards Black people. This combination of fear and hostility prevents people from responding to or fighting racism.

Sadiqa – Sadiqa is Kendi's wife, a nationally renowned emergency physician, medical researcher, and committed antiracist. In Chapter 16, Kendi and Sadiqa discuss and learn to move past the "uplift" ideology, or the idea that Black people should regulate their behavior to convince white people to be less racist. In the last chapter, Kendi reveals that Sadiqa survived **breast cancer** after a difficult year of treatment.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Kwame – Kwame is a Ghanaian American student in Kendi's eighth-grade class. Kendi and other African American students frequently subjected him to ethnically racist jokes and insults.

Clarence – Clarence is Kendi's popular, intelligent, light-skinned roommate in college, who was always suspicious of Kendi's hare-brained theories about white people.

Kaila and Yaba – Kaila and Yaba are two brilliant, courageous, outspoken Black queer feminist scholars in Kendi's doctoral program who initially intimidate him, then later teach him to unlearn sexism and homophobia.

TERMS

Race – Race is commonly defined as a group of people who share physical or social characteristics, but **Kendi** explains that race is actually a contrived idea used to divide and conquer groups of people. Kendi's definition of race has two major components: first, race is "a power construct [...] that lives socially." It has no real biological basis and was invented by racist conquerors and policymakers. This is why Kendi defines race as a power construct, not a social construct—but society at large does reproduce the power construct of race by repeating racist ideas, which is why Kendi says that race "lives socially." The second part of Kendi's definition is that race is made of "collected or merged difference." This means that imposed racial categories haphazardly combine a diverse variety of people and ethnic groups into a single label.

Racism – **Kendi** defines racism as a "marriage" between certain policies and ideas. Racist policies create racial inequity, and then racist ideas serve to justify those policies and inequities. People can be racist on the basis of presumed genetic, cultural, ethnic, or behavioral differences between racial groups—all of

which Kendi argues are factually incorrect.

Antiracism – Antiracism is the opposite of racism: it's a set of policies and ideas that creates and supports racial equity (whereas racism produces and defends racial *inequity*). But just like racial inequity comes from racist policies (not just racist ideas), racial equity must come from antiracist policies.

Assimilationism – Assimilationism is the belief that one race is inherently superior to another, but that these differences can be overcome if the inferior group changes to more closely resemble the superior group. Assimilationism and segregationism are the two principal types of racist ideas and policies in the U.S.

Segregationism – Segregationism is the belief that one racial group is inherently inferior to another and therefore must be forcibly separated from the dominant group. Assimilationism and segregationism are the two principal types of racist ideas and policies in the U.S.

Dueling Consciousness – Dueling consciousness is **Kendi**'s term for how people struggle to separate and choose between two competing concepts of race. For African American people, this often means getting caught between antiracism and assimilationism. For white American people, it's common to get stuck between segregationism and assimilationism, which are both racist ideas.

Colorism – Colorism is a form of racism that specifically creates inequity between light- and dark-skinned people. **Kendi** points out that this is common within various racial and ethnic groups all over the world, but he focuses on inequities between light-skinned and dark-skinned Black people in the United States.

Racial Capitalism – Racial capitalism refers to the historical links between racism and capitalism. Just like racism comes from a melding of policies and ideas, many of the deepest inequities in the modern world come from the historical joining of racism and capitalism. Specifically, capitalism relies on inequity between different groups of people to turn a profit—and these different groups are often divided by race.

Powerless Defense – **Kendi** defines the powerless defense as the false and disempowering idea that Black people can't be racist because they have no societal power. Kendi believes that the powerless defense protects Black racists, and that it leads people of color to wrongly view antiracism as a fight against white people instead of a fight against racism.

Intersectionality – Intersectionality refers to how different kinds of inequity—racism, sexism, classism, and so on—*intersect* to produce more complex forms of oppression. The term was coined by feminist legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw.

Eugenics – Eugenics is the practice of selectively breeding human beings in order to change the racial makeup of a certain population.

THEMES

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RACISM VS. ANTIRACISM

In *How to Be an Antiracist*, Ibram X. Kendi combines history, theory, and memoir in order to explain how people can actively become antiracist. Although defining key terms might seem boring or unglamorous, Kendi argues that they're actually the single most important—and most overlooked—way to improve our ideas, policies, and conversations about racism. In particular, Kendi argues that the meaning of the word "racist" has in many ways been distorted: many people view it as a hateful slur, a political buzzword, or an accusation of irredeemable evil. But in reality, racism has a precise definition: it is "a marriage of racist policies and racist ideas that produces and normalizes racial inequities." Specifically, the policies produce racial inequities, while the ideas normalize those inequities and policies. Based on this definition, Kendi argues that the words "racist" and "antiracist" are "like peelable name tags" that apply to our beliefs and actions, as opposed to "permanent tattoos" that define who we are. But while there are degrees of racism and antiracism, there is no middle ground between them. Kendi argues that every political idea assumes that racial groups are either unequal or equal, and every policy either reinforces racial inequities or takes steps to solve them.

To understand racism, first it's necessary to understand race, which isn't actually based in biology. There's no gene that determines race, nor is there a scientific test to measure it. On the other hand, ethnicity—a person's heritage as part of a specific cultural or national group—does usually relate to their ancestry. Even though ethnicity is defined by culture and not by science, it does often correlate with genetics (unlike race). People often think of race as just a large grouping of genetically similar ethnicities, but this isn't true: for instance, West African ethnic groups are genetically closer to Western European groups than to East African groups. In short, race isn't a meaningful biological concept. Rather, it's a social concept that arbitrarily merges many different groups of people (like all West Africans and East Africans) into one broad racial category. And specifically, race is a social construct that's used to maintain power: racial categories are created by powerful people, under specific circumstances, in order to serve self-interested goals. As an example, Kendi cites what he found to be the earliest recorded racist idea: the Portuguese writer Gomes de Zurara declared that all people from Africa were subhuman animals who lacked reason and morality. He did this

specifically to justify the profitable new slave-trading policy that his boss, Prince Henry the Navigator, was developing. In other words, to advance his own interests, he created a category of people and then declared that category inferior to his own people.

The other basic concept that Kendi uses to define racism is "inequity." Inequity simply means that different groups do not have "approximately equal" standing in certain important aspects of social life—like wealth, health outcomes, educational attainment, or representation in government. When races are the groups that differ in this way, it's defined as racial inequity. And because there's no scientific basis for racial categories or hierarchies, racial inequities never result from inherent differences among different racial groups. Rather, they always come from governmental or institutional policies.

Based on these foundational concepts, Kendi builds a clear definition of how racism works in society: certain policies create inequities among racial groups, and then people invent ideas to justify those policies and normalize those inequities. Usually, powerful people create these policies and ideas for their own benefit, but then they take on a life of their own and circulate in society at large. Accordingly, individuals do not have to be powerful to be racist—the crux of racism lies in expressing racist ideas or supporting racist policies. Concretely, this means that racism equates to directly implementing racist policies (whether official or informal), suggesting that any racial group is inherently superior to any other, or blaming observable racial inequities on racial group differences rather than on policy.

While racists support policies that create inequity and ideas that justify it, antiracists support policies that create equity, then justify those policies with antiracist ideas. Crucially, antiracist policies that promote racial equity are not the same as color-blind policies that treat all racial groups in exactly the same way. Rather, antiracist policies have to discriminate by race in order to create equity. For example, in college admissions, affirmative action is an *antiracist* education policy designed to counteract the disparities in high school achievement produced by *racist* education policies (like inequitable school funding, government-mandated residential segregation, and unequal access to test-prep classes). While some people explain these disparities by claiming that certain groups are inherently less intelligent, it wouldn't make sense for race to impact intelligence, since it's not a biological category. Rather, all available evidence shows that policy causes these disparities. This illustrates the difference between racist ideas, which blame the groups who suffer from racial inequities for those inequities, and antiracist ideas, which blame policies for racial inequities.

Accordingly, Kendi suggests that being a racist or an antiracist is as simple as supporting racist or antiracist policies and expressing racist or antiracist ideas. Racism already exists—it's up to us to choose whether to perpetuate it or fight against it.

Kendi defines someone who advances racist policies and ideas, pretends they don't exist, or chooses not to do anything about them as racist. By contrast, someone who fights racist policies and ideas is antiracist. Anyone can overcome their racism and become antiracist, but devoted antiracists can also fall back into racism. Finally, Kendi asserts that it's impossible to be "not racist." The policies and ideas that people support push society in one of two directions: toward racial equity or toward greater racial inequity.

ACTIVISM AND SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION

Ibram X. Kendi's goal is not merely to educate people or help them measure how antiracist they are: rather, it's to build a racially equitable society. Although education and personal change are important steps along the way to political change, the latter is rooted in governmental and institutional policies, not merely ideas. In fact, Kendi argues that anyone who elevates ideas above policy change is not really an activist at all. While education and reflection can help people unlearn racism, Kendi explicitly criticizes people who focus primarily on righteously debating others, judging people by their beliefs, or maintaining a sense of moral purity. He thinks that true antiracists must focus on bringing people into an inclusive, diverse activist movement. So while Kendi believes that antiracist ideas can be a means to personal transformation, he also concludes that such changes can only lead to societal transformation when combined with policy change.

Kendi uses his own experiences as a model for how readers can become antiracists. This requires learning about history, reflecting on their existing beliefs, and challenging their assumptions about race. Kendi opens the book with what he calls a "Racist Introduction." He remembers giving a speech full of racist tropes and stereotypes about young Black people—like himself—at an oratorical contest named after Martin Luther King Jr. He explains that many of these racist ideas were simply part of the common sense he learned growing up. By emphasizing that even he himself, an expert on antiracism, used to be a racist, Kendi makes it clear that anyone can overcome their racism and join the movement for an antiracist society. For him, this process required gradually peeling back the layers of racism that affected his thinking. For instance, he had to abandon the fiction that it's possible to be "not racist" before he could recognize that many of his own ideas and political beliefs were racist, even though he didn't intend them to be. Through understanding the broader history of such racist ideas and policies, he realized that his upbringing conditioned him to uncritically accept them. This shows that, while it's a long and gradual process, people have to recognize and unlearn their racist ideas if they want to help build a more racially just and equitable world.

Over his years of reflection, however, Kendi actually realized

that personal transformation isn't enough to create widespread social change. Rather, because racial inequity is the result of racist policy, antiracists have to build political power and implement antiracist policies to truly create equity. Kendi realized this while writing his previous book *Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America*. By studying racist ideas, he realized that they do not actually create racial inequities. When antiracist educators disprove existing racist ideas, racist policies do not fall: rather, they stay around while people in power rush to justify them with *new* racist ideas. Accordingly, Kendi's life plan—to become a professor and educate away people's ignorance about racism—suddenly looked impossible. He realized that he needed to research and change policy if he wanted to do anything about racism.

Kendi concludes that antiracists can only effectively achieve their goals by focusing on policy, not ideas. He does so by examining his own failures as a college activist. He remembers convening a Black Student Union meeting in graduate school in order to try to help the Jena 6, a group of young Black men unfairly sentenced to long criminal sentences for retaliating against a racist threat. Kendi was fiery and dogmatic, but the other students were wary of his plan to build a national movement and send a convoy of cars to Washington. He responded by attacking their intentions, which ended up undermining his entire strategy. This showed him that activists need to be patient and open-minded—they should focus on building an inclusive movement and persuading others, rather than showing off their own intelligence and loyalty to the cause. After this meeting, Kendi learned about the difference between a demonstration and a protest. The Black Student Union put on a demonstration in which the students marched around campus and raised awareness but did not translate this into any political demand. In contrast, a protest is a long-term campaign designed to build power and create policy change. Those in power do not change policies unless doing so benefits them, so protest requires people to make inaction costlier than social change. This often requires protesters to put themselves on the line and risk ostracism, injury, or imprisonment. Protestors have to sacrifice themselves to save others—or, alternatively, sacrifice their short-term self-interest in order to invest in the long-term goal of building an antiracist society. This means that engaging in protest rather than demonstration requires examining one's own political self-interest and recognizing that one may have to make deep sacrifices for the sake of justice.

So while personal and social transformation are both important processes that parallel each other, Kendi argues that personal change is only valuable insofar as it leads to broader societal change. Of course, every individual makes the world a slightly better place when they become an antiracist, but nobody becomes an activist simply by talking the talk. Accordingly, Kendi asks his readers to walk the walk, if they're genuinely committed to antiracism: to join protest movements, hold their peers accountable, and leverage whatever power they do have to fight for racial equity in their schools, workplaces, and communities.

INTERSECTIONALITY

How to Be an Antiracist is principally about racism and antiracism, but Ibram X. Kendi also discusses other forms of inequity and injustice, like sexism, classism, homophobia, and transphobia. He builds on Black feminist scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality, which refers to how people who live at the "intersections" of these inequities experience them. Namely, these forms of inequity do not merely layer on top of one another—rather, they intersect to produce specific experiences that are not merely equivalent to the sum of their parts. For instance, a Black woman doesn't experience racism in the same way as a Black man or sexism in the same way as a white woman. Rather, racism and sexism work together in the everyday abuse and social inequities that Black women experience. Therefore, conventional antiracist and feminist movements often exclude Black women (and other people who suffer multiple forms of inequity). Because inequity is intersectional, Kendi argues that a movement against one form of inequity must collaborate with movements against other forms of inequity. In fact, activists should actively work to eradicate *all* forms of inequity. In other words, to be genuinely inclusive and achieve meaningful equity, antiracists must also fight the other forms of prejudice that intersect with racism.

Racism is not a uniform force that affects everyone in the same way. Rather, it intersects with other kinds of social power and inequity to create a complex range of outcomes and experiences. For example, the intersection between race and class is particularly important. Poor and wealthy people who belong to the same racial group have different access to resources, so lumping them together means failing to truly understand their different circumstances and interests. To represent the interests of all people of color, antiracist movements must account for the intersections between classism and racism. If they don't, they are likely to demand policies that primarily benefit upper-class people of color (like diversity in elite schools and corporate management).

Racism also intersects with sexism, homophobia, and transphobia in ways that create specific challenges for women of color and non-heterosexual or trans people of color. For instance, Black trans women are largely excluded from the formal economy by discrimination and face uniquely high rates of violence and poverty. This isn't reducible to the challenges of being Black, trans, or a woman. Rather, it depends on the intersection of all three. In turn, this means that Black trans women cannot fight for their interests simply by joining an antiracist movement that ignores sexism and transphobia, a

queer movement dominated by white gay men, or a feminist movement that ignores racism. If antiracist movements fail to account for the experiences of people who aren't straight men, they unintentionally prioritize the dominant perspective of cisgender, heterosexual men like Kendi, who are a minority of people of color. In short, movements that are not explicitly intersectional end up unintentionally becoming exclusionary.

Racism not only interacts with other forms of inequity to create a diverse range of experiences but also itself encompasses many different kinds of prejudice and inequity, which antiracists must take into account. Racism depends on far more than just how racist ideas "racialize" people (assign them to racial categories). For instance, dark-skinned people tend to experience far more severe anti-Black racism as compared to light-skinned people, and African American and Black immigrant communities in the U.S. often hold ethnically racist ideas about each other. It is both misleading and counterproductive to assume that all of these groups have the exact same needs and interests just because they are all Black.

By identifying the intersections among different forms of social hierarchy, Kendi demonstrates how people who are disadvantaged by racial inequities can also perpetrate them. In his chapters on anti-white racism and the idea that Black people can't be racist (which he calls the "powerless defense"), Kendi concludes that Black people cannot avoid scrutiny for their racism simply because they also *face* racism. First, he argues that some people simply do choose to invert racism and decide that white people are inferior to other races. This closely resembles other racist ideas, and it's counterproductive and inexcusable: it leads people of color to target all white people instead of targeting racism. In reality, antiracist movements grow stronger by trying to identify anti-white ideas and replace them with antiracist ones. Similarly, Kendi rejects the powerless defense because it takes an overly simplistic view of power—it's not logical to assume that all white people are oppressors and all Black people are oppressed. In reality, different forms of power intersect, and many Black people—like CEOs, police officers, and politicians—*do* have power, which they often use in racist ways. In contrast, many working-class white people have very little power but share antiracists' interests in economic justice. But without understanding how different forms of power intersect, the fight against racism easily gets turned into an unproductive campaign against white people. Similarly, Kendi emphasizes that people of color can still be sexist, homophobic, elitist, ethnically racist, and so on. Just like white women should be accountable for their racism, people of color should be held accountable for their sexism—it cannot be excused simply because they are antiracists. On the contrary: Kendi argues that someone is not genuinely being antiracist if they exacerbate other social inequities and ignore the connections among them.

Kendi concludes that an intersectional worldview improves social movements by showing that nobody is totally powerless, nobody is above accountability, and everyone is responsible for promoting solidarity and inclusion. All power constructs and forms of inequity are connected to one another: they intersect and are based on the same fundamental logic of turning differences into hierarchies. So all struggles for liberation and justice are fundamentally linked, and for Kendi, a movement against one form of inequity must be part of a broader movement against *all* forms of inequity.

THE HISTORY OF RACIST IDEAS AND POLICIES

Before writing *How to Be an Antiracist*, Ibram X. Kendi was an award-winning historian who studied how racist ideas have transformed over the centuries. In this book, he repeatedly references what he calls "racist progress": racism's capacity to adapt to new social contexts by generating new racist ideas and policy strategies. But at the same time as racism's ideas, language, and policy proposals evolve, its basic ideological assumptions and political goals largely stay the same. By studying history and revealing these fundamental patterns, Kendi seeks to help activists understand how racism is evolving in the present and achieve "antiracist progress"—or adapt their own strategies to the times.

In general, racist ideas evolve over time to become more indirect and therefore harder to combat. The first racist ideas and policies were blatant and unapologetic. During the transatlantic slave trade and the conquest of the Americas, European leaders simply decided that non-white people were not fully human and then used this belief to justify enslaving and killing them. Since the people they subjugated had virtually no power, explorers, enslavers, and colonizers had little reason to disguise their horrific ideas. Eventually, however, racist ideas and policies became strategies for policymakers and racist elites to maintain power. Over the years, they became more indirect. For instance, Kendi argues that today's "post-racial" ideology—or the idea that we have defeated racism and do not need to think about race—is actually a very dangerous racist idea. By suggesting that racism no longer exists, "post-racial" ideology implies that racist policies don't either. In turn, it implies that the racial inequities that still exist can't be the product of racist policies. Rather, post-racial ideology blames inequities on people's inherent racial differences. In other words, it is a more complicated version of the same thing racists have always believed: that people, not policies, cause racial inequities. This shows that, as antiracists make steady progress towards identifying and refuting racist ideas, racists have also made progress: they now disguise racism by claiming to be "not racist."

But Kendi demonstrates that, even as they evolve over time, racist policies essentially fall into two ideological camps—assimilationism and segregationism—while racist ideas

usually focus on biology, culture, and behavior. Kendi argues that many people struggle with a dueling consciousness—or a conflict between two opposing ideologies—when seeking solutions to racial inequity. Black people are caught between antiracism and assimilationism, or the idea that socially subordinate groups should imitate the dominant group in order to improve and be successful. (This is based on the racist assumption that the subordinate group is less powerful *because* it is not like the dominant group.) Meanwhile, many white people get stuck between assimilationism and segregationism, which is the idea that certain groups are inferior and cannot change, and thus have to be permanently separated from superior groups. Across time and place, Kendi argues, all of racism's innovative new proposals ultimately fall into these two camps. For instance, segregationists initially defended slavery, then proposed sending freed slaves back to Africa, then implemented Jim Crow segregation. Since the 1980s, they've implemented the War on Drugs, a set of policies that disproportionately affects people of color and has led to their mass incarceration for nonviolent drug offense. While their precise mechanisms have changed, ultimately these segregationist policies are all doing the same thing: trying to exclude Black people from the American political community. Understanding this trend helps antiracists identify and call it out in the future.

Similarly, Kendi points out that, even as racist ideas evolve, they usually rely on the assumption that groups are unequal in terms of biology, culture, or behavior. For instance, slaveowners argued that Black people were inherently lazy or stupid because they were unwilling to work, while abolitionists argued that slavery made Black people lazy and stupid. Over a century later, in the 1990s, Kendi strongly believed that Black teenagers like him were inherently unintelligent, lazy students. The central racist idea remains the same: Black people behave in an inferior way, which justifies their inferior status in society (whether as slaves, disenfranchised people, or a poor urban underclass). Yet Kendi believes that there is no coherent argument for the biological, cultural, or behavioral superiority of one racial group. One race cannot be biologically superior to another, because race is not a measurable scientific category. While there are discernible cultural differences among different racial groups, Kendi explains, there is no way to coherently argue that one culture is superior to another. "Racial group behavior" is an incoherent concept because behavior is something that individuals do, not something that races do.

While Kendi focuses on racism's evolution, his work's implication is clear: antiracists also have to evolve if they want a fighting chance at building a just future. This is why Kendi compares various metaphors for racism in his last three chapters: different antiracist ideas are suitable for different times and places. For instance, while the idea of institutional racism was useful in the 1960s, now the term confuses people more than it helps them. This is why Kendi uses the more straightforward concept of racist policy. Similarly, Kendi remembers lashing out at a scholar who compared racism to a disease—Kendi preferred to view it as an organ, a permanent and essential part of the body that represents America. But then he realized that, if racism is essential to America, then people can't beat it. After Kendi, his mother, and his wife Sadiqa all survived **cancer** over the course of a few short years, he realized that the disease metaphor *is* useful for antiracists today. Racism is severe and deadly, and it spreads rapidly, just like cancer metastasizes. But just as chemotherapy and surgery can cure cancer, antiracists gaining power and policy can theoretically cure racism. There's no guarantee of beating it, but Kendi insists that it's possible—so both cancer patients and antiracists must balance a realistic assessment of the powerful forces they face with a sense of unfailing courage and hope.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

CANCER

Kendi compares his battle against stage-four cancer to America's fight against racism to represent the kind of mindset that antiracist activists should adopt. When Kendi first heard another scholar compare racism to a disease at a conference, he loudly objected. Diseases are curable, he said, whereas racism is permanent, "like an organ" that the United States needs to function. But Kendi later realized that viewing racism as permanent means viewing ourselves as incapable of solving it. This makes the organ metaphor ineffective: it's the flipside of people assuming that solving racism is as easy as attending a demonstration and then quitting activism when they realize it's more complicated. In reality, beating racism requires the much more difficult work of fighting racist policies with antiracist ones. This is why it's like defeating stage-four cancer: it's a bitter fight, and the odds are overwhelmingly on racism's side. But it's also winnable, and it's impossible to win unless activists maintain a hope and vision for a better future.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Penguin edition of *How to Be an Antiracist* published in 2019.

Racist Introduction Quotes

❝ What's the problem with being "not racist"? It is a claim that signifies neutrality: "I am not a racist, but neither am I aggressively against racism." But there is no neutrality in the racism struggle. The opposite of "racist" isn't "not racist." It is "antiracist." What's the difference? 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.

Related Characters: Dr. Ibram X. Kendi (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 9

Explanation and Analysis

In his introduction to *How to Be an Antiracist*, Ibram X. Kendi presents his basic vision of racism and antiracism. By recalling an embarrassingly racist speech he gave at a contest in high school, he points out that many racist ideas are seen as common sense in the United States. Building off this insight, he explains that fighting racism requires learning to address it without igniting passions and controversies that shut down meaningful discussion. In other words, people of all races need clear definitions of racism and antiracism, and they need to feel safe making mistakes in order to grow out of their racist ideas.

Accordingly, Kendi argues against one of the most damaging conventional views of racism in pop culture: that racism is inherently built into people, which means that they cannot overcome it and have to be ostracized from polite society. Many people who are accused of being racist assume that others are speaking from this perspective, and they respond by claiming to not be racist. But this misses Kendi's point: since racism is about social equity, "there is no neutrality." Being "neutral" about racism means accepting racism without trying to change it, which means being racist. But Kendi emphasizes that people can change themselves, which means that conversations about racism don't have to lead to condemnation and conflict. Rather, they can be opportunities for personal growth and the formation of strong new relationships. In short, although Kendi might ask his readers to point out racism in more situations than before, his definition of racism helps people use the resulting conversations to help build understanding, not disagreement.

Chapter 1: Definitions Quotes

❝ Definitions anchor us in principles. This is not a light point: If we don't do the basic work of defining the kind of people we want to be in language that is stable and consistent, we can't work toward stable, consistent goals. Some of my most consequential steps toward being an antiracist have been the moments when I arrived at basic definitions. To be an antiracist is to set lucid definitions of racism/antiracism, racist/antiracist policies, racist/antiracist ideas, racist/antiracist people. To be a racist is to constantly redefine racist in a way that exonerates one's changing policies, ideas, and personhood.

Related Characters: Dr. Ibram X. Kendi (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 17

Explanation and Analysis

Readers often view definitions as a formality that they have to get through before they can reach a nonfiction book's main argument and supporting evidence. In this book, however, Kendi's definitions *are* the main argument: his central goal is to show people why they have been thinking about racism backwards, which prevents them from actually defeating it. Namely, many people have no clear idea of what makes something racist, and others assume that racist ideas create racist inequities.

In reality, Kendi argues, the self-interest of powerful people drives racist policies that create inequities, and racist ideas are what follow. To fight inequities and racist policies, however, antiracists first have to peel back the racist ideas that defend them—including confusion about the very definition of racism. Definitions are essential precisely because they help people fight racist ideas and develop a shared vocabulary for talking about racism in more precise and practical ways. Because there's no scientific backing for racism, it relies on confusing and distracting people. If antiracists clearly understand what they're talking about, they can keep conversations focused rather than succumbing to these tactics.

❝ "Racist" and "antiracist" are like peelable name tags that are placed and replaced based on what someone is doing or not doing, supporting or expressing in each moment. These are not permanent tattoos. No one becomes a racist or antiracist. We can only strive to be one or the other. We can unknowingly strive to be a racist. We can knowingly strive to be an antiracist. Like fighting an addiction, being an antiracist requires persistent self-awareness, constant self-criticism, and regular self-examination.

Related Characters: Dr. Ibram X. Kendi (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 23

Explanation and Analysis

Kendi explains that one of the most powerful myths about racism is the idea that people are racist in some deep, fundamental way. In other words, it's assumed that racist people are evil and will never change. But neither of these assumptions is true, and both of them get in the way of meaningfully changing society. A fight between good and evil *ideas* isn't the same as a fight between good and evil *people*, because if people can't change, then antiracists will never convince anyone else to join the movement. And if people can't change, then this implies that antiracists are perfect and never make mistakes.

So rather than talking about racists and antiracists, as if those words were "permanent tattoos," Kendi implores antiracists to focus on the racist ideas and policies that people support. Words and actions, not people, are racist—and antiracism's greatest victory is not defeating racists but rather converting them to antiracism. By letting go of the notion that racism and antiracism are unchanging identities, people can continue improving themselves and actively investing their energies toward the goal of social change. Because antiracism requires politically engaged activists in order to succeed, it is not something that people *are*—rather, it's something that people commit to.

Chapter 2: Dueling Consciousness Quotes

❝ History duels: the undeniable history of antiracist progress, the undeniable history of racist progress. Before and after the Civil War, before and after civil rights, before and after the first Black presidency, the White consciousness duels. The White body defines the American body. The White body segregates the Black body from the American body. The White body instructs the Black body to assimilate into the American body. The White body rejects the Black body assimilating into the American body—and history and consciousness duel anew.

Related Characters: Dr. Ibram X. Kendi (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 33

Explanation and Analysis

Kendi presents a theory of what he calls dueling consciousness, in which Americans get caught between two competing worldviews about race. White Americans tend to be torn between the two racist ideas of segregationism and assimilationism; Black Americans tend to the necessity of antiracism but sometimes fall into assimilationism; and the nation as a whole struggles to choose between a racist and antiracist future. By presenting the history of racist policies and ideas as a duel, Kendi points out that segregationist, assimilationist, and antiracist policies and ideas are constantly changing—even if each school of thought sticks to similar principles over time. This is why antiracism is never a finished process: antiracism has to adapt to both the new contexts that history constantly presents and the new strategies that racists develop in order to sustain their power.

Even more importantly, Kendi's theory of dueling consciousness challenges the commonplace belief that history is a continuous march of progress. This idea is appealing, but it simply isn't true: for instance, Black people had greater political rights immediately after the Civil War than they did in the 1950s. Racists are constantly trying to seize more power, and they often succeed. In other words, sometimes society progresses toward equity and justice, and sometimes toward hierarchy and oppression. In fact, the belief in inevitable progress is a powerful racist idea because it encourages people to do nothing and simply wait for things to get better. Kendi clarifies that this isn't how social change works: antiracist progress is the result of masses of people dedicating their lives to the cause of racial equity—not some inherent principle that works without targeted activism.

Chapter 3: Power Quotes

❝ I do not pity my seven-year-old self for identifying racially as Black. I still identify as Black. Not because I believe Blackness, or race, is a meaningful scientific category but because our societies, our policies, our ideas, our histories, and our cultures have rendered race and made it matter. I am among those who have been degraded by racist ideas, suffered under racist policies, and who have nevertheless endured and built movements and cultures to resist or at least persist through this madness.

Related Characters: Dr. Ibram X. Kendi (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 37-8

Explanation and Analysis

Kendi explains the concept of race: although it's often viewed as synonymous with ancestry, race actually has nothing to do with biology. It exists nowhere in nature and was invented by powerful people in order to categorize and rank human lives. In other words, race is what Kendi calls a "power construct."

However, in this passage, Kendi also explains that people must take race and racism seriously because of history. We have inherited a world stratified by race, so fighting inequity requires taking race into account. While antiracists would be delighted to eventually do away with race, for now, it is still one of the organizing principles of "our societies, our policies, our ideas, our histories, and our cultures." In other words, people have to accept the cultural, historical, and social reality of race in order to undo the inequities that have created it. Therefore, there is no contradiction between denying that race is biological and insisting on seeing and thinking about it.

❝ Prince Henry's racist policy of slave trading came first—a cunning invention for the practical purpose of bypassing Muslim traders. After nearly two decades of slave trading, King Afonso asked Gomes de Zurara to defend the lucrative commerce in human lives, which he did through the construction of a Black race, an invented group upon which he hung racist ideas. This cause and effect—a racist power creates racist policies out of raw self-interest; the racist policies necessitate racist ideas to justify them—lingers over the life of racism.

Related Characters: Dr. Ibram X. Kendi (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 42

Explanation and Analysis

When Kendi examines the historical evolution of the concept of race, he essentially concludes that race itself was the first racist idea. In short, Europeans like Gomes de Zurara began classifying other human beings by race in order to justify their decision to enslave non-Europeans and hoard all the wealthy they produced. This policy was motivated not by racism but by a desire for profit: by directly sending ships to enslave people in West Africa, the Portuguese could bypass the Arab merchants who were serving as middlemen in the slave trade. So like all racist ideas, the idea of race was created to justify an inequitable policy. It did so retroactively, after the policy was already put in place. In other words, the idea of race didn't *cause* inequity—it *normalized* inequity. This is Kendi's basic insight about the way racism works. And this insight forms the foundation of his theory that activism needs to build power and prioritize policy change over winning hearts and minds.

Chapter 4: Biology Quotes

❝ There is no such thing as racial ancestry. Ethnic ancestry does exist. Camara Jones, a prominent medical researcher of health disparities, explained it this way to bioethics scholar Dorothy Roberts: "People are born with ancestry that comes from their parents but are assigned a race." People from the same ethnic groups that are native to certain geographic regions typically share the same genetic profile. Geneticists call them "populations." When geneticists compare these ethnic populations, they find there is more genetic diversity between populations within Africa than between Africa and the rest of the world. Ethnic groups in Western Africa are more genetically similar to ethnic groups in Western Europe than to ethnic groups in Eastern Africa. Race is a genetic mirage.

Related Characters: Dr. Ibram X. Kendi (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 53

Explanation and Analysis

In his chapter on biological racism, Kendi briefly summarizes and the relationship between race and ethnicity in order to explain why any belief in racial ancestry—or a relationship between race and genetics—inevitably turns into biological racism. In short, race is a construct created by people in positions of power—it's not a biological reality based in the human body or genome. Countless scientists have searched for a biological explanation for race, yet none of their work holds up because human beings, not nature, created the taxonomy of race. Race science is an oxymoron, because race is not the kind of phenomenon that can be studied through hard sciences.

Ethnicity, on the other hand, does involve ancestry. Notably, Kendi is not saying that ethnicity is *primarily* a genetic category—rather, ethnicity is defined by a group's shared history and cultural traditions. But because these things run in families, people of the same ethnicity usually also share certain genetic traits. In other words, genes do not *define* ethnicity, but they *correlate* with it.

It's a common mistake to think that races are just collections of similar ethnicities—for instance, that sub-Saharan African people are generally grouped as Black because they are ethnically similar. This is why Kendi points out that there's more genetic variation within than outside of Africa, and West African populations are closer to Western European populations than to East African populations. Even though members of the same ethnic population are often (but not always) viewed as members of the same race, this shows that race does not depend on ethnicity.

❝ Terminating racial categories is potentially the last, not the first, step in the antiracist struggle. [...] To be antiracist is to also recognize the living, breathing reality of this racial mirage, which makes our skin colors more meaningful than our individuality. To be antiracist is to focus on ending the racism that shapes the mirages, not to ignore the mirages that shape people's lives.

Related Characters: Dr. Ibram X. Kendi (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 54-5

Explanation and Analysis

When antiracists point out that race is a social category rather than a biological one, people often assume this means that the solution is to stop believing in race altogether. But this "post-racial" or "colorblind" reply misses Kendi's point: race is a "mirage," but it also "shape[s] people's lives" in a way that is hard to ignore. Kendi understands why the "colorblind" idea is appealing: it suggests that we have total control over racism and can make it disappear through a force of collective will. But this isn't true, because racism is an idea with profound real-world effects. Being social rather than biological does not make ideas like race any less real.

Kendi makes the point that antiracists certainly hope to do away with racial categories in the distant future—but only once people have managed to resolve the inequities created by those categories. Although racial categories have historically been labels used to discriminate, now, racial categories are also useful as labels that help us see and fight inequity in the world. Without seeing race, antiracists cannot see or stop racism. This is why "colorblind" or "post-racial" ideology is actually a racist idea: it asks us to overlook injustice rather than solve it.

Chapter 5: Ethnicity Quotes

❝ How can I get upset at immigrants from Africa and South America for looking down on African Americans when African Americans have historically looked down on immigrants from Africa and South America? How can I critique their ethnic racism and ignore my ethnic racism? That is the central double standard in ethnic racism: loving one's position on the ladder above other ethnic groups and hating one's position below that of other ethnic groups. It is angrily trashing the racist ideas about one's own group but happily consuming the racist ideas about other ethnic groups. It is failing to recognize that racist ideas we consume about others came from the same restaurant and the same cook who used the same ingredients to make different degrading dishes for us all.

Related Characters: Dr. Ibram X. Kendi (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 65-6

Explanation and Analysis

Ethnic racism is unique because its perpetrators tend to also be its victims. In theory, this should make it especially easy for them to recognize and work past their ethnically racist beliefs—but in practice, this often makes it even more difficult. Because ethnic racism's perpetrators personally understand ethnic racism's effects, they strongly resist the idea that they could be responsible for inflicting the same damage on other groups. In other words, addressing ethnic racism requires us to confront our own hypocrisy. Anyone who critiques ethnic racism also has to seriously question their own beliefs about other ethnic groups. Of course, to successfully strive for antiracism, people often need to perform this kind of sustained self-critique. This is one reason why examining ethnic racism can be a useful place to start, even if it can be difficult at first: ultimately, it can help people empathize with others and learn to critique all forms of racism.

Chapter 7: Culture Quotes

Enslaved Africans formulated new languages in nearly every European colony in the Americas […] In every one of these countries, racist power—those in control of government, academia, education, and media—has demeaned these African languages as dialects, as "broken" or "improper" or "nonstandard" French, Spanish, Dutch, Portuguese, or English. Assimilationists have always urged Africans in the Americas to forget the "broken" languages of our ancestors and master the apparently "fixed" languages of Europeans—to speak "properly." […] The idea that Black languages outside Africa are broken is as culturally racist as the idea that languages inside Europe are fixed.

Related Characters: Dr. Ibram X. Kendi (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 83

Explanation and Analysis

One of the most pervasive culturally racist beliefs is the assumption that non-white people speak different and inferior versions of European languages. This idea is common: all around the world, children learn in school that a certain dialect of their language is correct, while others need correction. But linguists point out that nothing makes any dialect better or worse than any other—as with all cultural phenomena, it's impossible to judge them by any outside standard. To say that white English is superior to Black English is just as illogical as putting it the other way around—just like racial hierarchies, dialect hierarchies are based solely in power. It's no surprise that, as a result, groups who have historically held more power speak dialects that are closer to the socially accepted standard. A racist explanation would say that such groups speak "better" dialects because they are superior people. But the antiracist explanation would say that these groups had more power, so they used that power to make their dialects seem "standard" or neutral.

With this in mind, Kendi argues that American schools teach children racist ideology by declaring that traditionally white dialects are "standard" English, whereas subordinate groups speak in a way that needs to be "fixed." Worst of all, students are asked to replicate these patterns of supposedly "proper" English on assignments and standardized test. This means that the concepts of intelligence and academic achievement really become measures of students' ability to imitate the dialects of white elites.

To be antiracist is to see all cultures in all their differences as on the same level, as equals. When we see cultural difference, we are seeing cultural difference—nothing more, nothing less.

Related Characters: Dr. Ibram X. Kendi (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 91

Explanation and Analysis

Cultural antiracism is the commitment to viewing all cultures as equals. This doesn't mean erasing the differences among them, but rather seeing that these differences do not justify viewing certain cultures as inherently superior to others. This sounds far more difficult in theory than it does in practice: for instance, we can notice the differences among people who wear different colors of clothing without thinking that the person wearing our own culture's clothing is inherently superior to others. It's perfectly normal to see difference without hierarchy—doing this with culture, however, often requires that people take a step outside their comfort zone. In practice, nobody can eradicate all the cultural beliefs from their lives—nor would their lives be very interesting if they did so. The solution is not to reject cultures, but rather to evaluate them on their own terms—or try to view cultural beliefs through the eyes of the people who believe them.

Chapter 8: Behavior Quotes

To be an antiracist is to recognize there is no such thing as racial behavior. To be an antiracist is to recognize there is no such thing as Black behavior, let alone irresponsible Black behavior. Black behavior is as fictitious as Black genes. There is no "Black gene." No one has ever scientifically established a single "Black behavioral trait." No evidence has ever been produced, for instance, to prove that Black people are louder, angrier, nicer, funnier, lazier, less punctual, more immoral, religious, or dependent; that Asians are more subservient; that Whites are greedier. All we have are stories of individual behavior. But individual stories are only proof of the behavior of individuals. Just as race doesn't exist biologically, race doesn't exist behaviorally.

Related Characters: Dr. Ibram X. Kendi (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 95

Explanation and Analysis

Kendi compares behavioral antiracism to biological antiracism because both are fundamentally based on refusing to believe in something that doesn't exist. By examining the scientific evidence and realizing that race has no basis in the human genome, people can become biological antiracists. Similarly, by examining human behavior and realizing that it is entirely individual and has nothing to do with race, people can become behavioral antiracists.

The essence of behavioral racism is a mistaken belief in the power of anecdotal evidence. What means is that behavioral racists confuse stories about individuals with collective truths about entire groups. For instance, because they hear stories about angry Black people, they assume that Black people are more likely to be angry. Indeed, this creates a circular effect: based on anecdotes, people believe that Black people are angrier, which leads to even more anecdotes about angry Black people. Moreover, people who believe in the racist myth of angry Black people are likely to notice any angry Black people they encounter and reinforce their racist beliefs.

Kendi is not denying that people's behavior differs, or that certain people might be lazier or more hardworking, more violent or peaceful, or ruder or more polite than others. Rather, he's saying that these individual differences have nothing to do with race: the same amount of variation in behavior exists within all racial groups.

❝ The use of standardized tests to measure aptitude and intelligence is one of the most effective racist policies ever devised to degrade Black minds and legally exclude Black bodies. We degrade Black minds every time we speak of an "academic-achievement gap" based on these numbers. The acceptance of an academic-achievement gap is just the latest method of reinforcing the oldest racist idea: Black intellectual inferiority. The idea of an achievement gap means there is a disparity in academic performance between groups of students; implicit in this idea is that academic achievement as measured by statistical instruments like test scores and dropout rates is the only form of academic "achievement." There is an even more sinister implication in achievement-gap talk—that disparities in academic achievement accurately reflect disparities in intelligence among racial groups. Intellect is the linchpin of behavior, and the racist idea of the achievement gap is the linchpin of behavioral racism.

Related Characters: Dr. Ibram X. Kendi (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 101-2

Explanation and Analysis

In his chapter on behavioral racism, Kendi addresses the longstanding, controversial debate on the relationship between race, standardized testing, and intelligence. Behavioral racists tend to use observed inequities between different racial groups' test scores to argue that white and Asian people are inherently more intelligent than Black and Latinx people. But Kendi sticks to the basic picture of racism that he sees repeated throughout history: policies create inequities, and racist ideas explain them. In other words, racist tests create inequities in test scores, which lead to broader inequities in the education system at large. For instance, educational resources are disproportionately allocated to predominately white and Asian communities. The idea of racial differences in intelligence is a way of justifying these inequities.

Therefore, Kendi concludes that there's a relationship between race and standardized test scores, but no relationship between intelligence and either race or standardized test scores. The tests are racist, because they produce inequitable outcomes among equal groups. Kendi doesn't believe that standardized tests are an accurate measure of general intelligence. They measure a few specific kinds of analytic skills—but mostly, they measure how well people paid attention in class, how effective their teachers happened to be, and how much time they spent studying for the specific test. None of these factors indicate that test-takers are any more or less intelligent—just more or less prepared. Kendi thus implicitly asks his readers to question their assumptions about what counts as intelligence. Many dimensions of intelligence (like spatial, emotional, and kinesthetic) never show up on standardized tests, and all dimensions of intelligence can change over time.

Chapter 10: White Quotes

❝ Whenever someone classifies people of European descent as biologically, culturally, or behaviorally inferior, whenever someone says there is something wrong with White people as a group, someone is articulating a racist idea.
The only thing wrong with White people is when they embrace racist ideas and policies and then deny their ideas and policies are racist. This is not to ignore that White people have massacred and enslaved millions of indigenous and African peoples, colonized and impoverished millions of people of color around the globe as their nations grew rich, all the while producing racist ideas that blame the victims. This is to say their history of pillaging is not the result of the evil genes or cultures of White people. There's no such thing as White genes. We must separate the warlike, greedy, bigoted, and individualist cultures of modern empire and racial capitalism (more on that later) from the cultures of White people.

Related Characters: Dr. Ibram X. Kendi (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 128

Explanation and Analysis

Unlike many people of color, Kendi firmly believes that anti-white racism exists. He knows this firsthand, because he was an anti-white racist in the past: in college, the easiest way for him to understand racism was by accepting outlandish beliefs about white people, like the conspiracy theory that they're aliens. Although he understands that he adopted these beliefs because they fit his specific interests and needs at the time—just like white people adopt racist beliefs in order to justify the inequities that benefit them—he has since learned to stop blaming white people for inequities and start blaming racism.

However, it's important to specify what *kind* of anti-white racism Kendi is describing. Crucially, Kendi never talks about anti-white policies, simply because white people have the majority of power in American society and tend to be the ones who benefit from racial inequities. This doesn't mean that there couldn't be anti-white racist policies—just that there aren't many right now, and they don't create inequities on the same scale as policies that discriminate against other races.

However, Kendi also argues that racist ideas always come about as a way to justify racial inequities, so there appears to be a contradiction in his argument: how can anti-white racist ideas form if they're not supporting anti-white racist policies? The answer is simple: anti-white racist ideas aren't defenses of anti-white policy, but rather of racist policies that target people of color. This is because anti-white racist ideas help the people who hold them explain the inequities that they themselves face. Anti-white racists say that racial inequity comes from white people's inherent, unconquerable racist instincts, rather than from racist policies that can be overturned and replaced with antiracist policies. In other words, because anti-white racism conflates racism with white people, it becomes an excuse to do nothing about racism against people of color.

Chapter 11: Black Quotes

❝ Racist ideas are constantly produced to cage the power of people to resist. Racist ideas make Black people believe White people have all the power, elevating them to gods. And so Black segregationists lash out at these all-powerful gods as fallen devils, as I did in college, while Black assimilationists worship their all-powerful White angels, strive to become them, to curry their favor, reproducing their racist ideas and defending their racist policies.

Related Characters: Dr. Ibram X. Kendi (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 142

Explanation and Analysis

The powerless defense is the idea that Black people cannot be racist because they hold no power in society. Of course, the same logic could be applied to any non-white racial group—and it would always be illogical. Like anti-white racist ideas, the powerless defense actually normalizes and justifies the inequities that harm people of color: it says that people of color suffer worse life outcomes simply because they are powerless to stop racism.

This is remarkably similar to other racist ideas that claim that people of color are inferior: it exaggerates racist white people's power in order to justify inaction in its face. It's true that stopping racism requires power, but the entire goal of antiracism is to build this power by organizing and mobilizing the power that people of color already have. By pretending this power doesn't exist, people of color give themselves an excuse not to try. This makes them complicit with racism, as they choose not to do anything about it. Often, they assume that they have to choose a political goal that still advantages white people, so they turn to assimilationism or even segregationism instead of antiracism.

Chapter 12: Class Quotes

❝ To love capitalism is to end up loving racism. To love racism is to end up loving capitalism. The conjoined twins are two sides of the same destructive body. The idea that capitalism is merely free markets, competition, free trade, supplying and demanding, and private ownership of the means of production operating for a profit is as whimsical and ahistorical as the White-supremacist idea that calling something racist is the primary form of racism. Popular definitions of capitalism, like popular racist ideas, do not live in historical or material reality. Capitalism is essentially racist; racism is essentially capitalist. They were birthed together from the same unnatural causes, and they shall one day die together from unnatural causes. Or racial capitalism will live into another epoch of theft and rapacious inequity, especially if activists naïvely fight the conjoined twins independently, as if they are not the same.

Related Characters: Dr. Ibram X. Kendi (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 163

Explanation and Analysis

Like many of the most influential and controversial thinkers of the last two centuries—ranging from W.E.B. DuBois and Martin Luther King Jr. to Karl Marx—Kendi argues that capitalism and racism are deeply interconnected. Throughout history, capitalism has always exploited racial differences in order to find cheap or forced labor and expand into new markets. Racism only emerged through the rise of global capitalism.

Kendi therefore argues that activists who fail to see this connection end up pursuing one of two misguided ideologies: the first being antiracism that excludes the working-class majority of people of color. The second is anticapitalism that excludes people of color, who make up the majority of those who are oppressed by capitalism. Accordingly, Kendi is skeptical of liberals who claim to support both capitalism and antiracism. They often define capitalism in terms of abstract economic concepts like "free markets" and "free trade" while ignoring its history. In fact, conservatives are the ones who tend to correctly understand capitalism as systematized exploitation. Again, Kendi emphasizes how ideas justify inequities by relying on biased, historically inaccurate definitions. Just as people can only claim to be "not racist" because they don't understand racism, people can only claim to be pro-capitalist but antiracist if they totally ignore the history of capitalism in the process.

Chapter 13: Space Quotes

❝ King's nightmare is a product of the dueling Brown decision. The court rightly undermined the legitimacy of segregated White spaces that hoard public resources, exclude all non-Whites, and are wholly dominated by White peoples and cultures. But the court also reinforced the legitimacy of integrated White spaces that hoard public resources, include some non-Whites, and are generally, though not wholly, dominated by White peoples and cultures. White majorities, White power, and White culture dominate both the segregated and the integrated, making both White. But the unspoken veil claims there is no such thing as integrated White spaces, or for that matter integrated Black spaces that are underresourced, include some non-Blacks, and are generally, though not wholly, dominated by Black peoples and cultures. The court ruled Black spaces, segregated or integrated, inherently unequal and inferior.

Related Characters: Dr. Ibram X. Kendi (speaker), Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 177-8

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Kendi essentially calls integration a counterproductive and racist idea, which might surprise readers who have learned that the 20th-century civil rights movement's goal was to replace segregation with integration. In fact, Kendi points out that the civil rights movement was far more radical than most present-day Americans realize. In particular, Americans tend to associate Martin Luther King Jr. with his famous dream of an equitable, seemingly colorblind world. This overlooks the fact that he also thought Black people needed to organize, build antiracist power, and reverse racist policies before Americans could really hope to build a racially equitable society.

Kendi examines the actual goals of 20th-century civil rights leaders and argues that the U.S. government passed integration policies as a kind of assimilationist measure to avoid truly redistributing power. Namely, integration forces Black people to assimilate into white-dominated spaces in order to gain resources that are equitable to white people's. Not only does this force Black people to leave their own communities if they truly want equal opportunities; it also upholds a racist hierarchy of racialized spaces by ensuring that white spaces continue to have more resources than Black ones. Accordingly, it's no surprise that American

schools and neighborhoods remain just as segregated today as they were in the mid-20th century: a choice between segregation and integration is really just a choice between two different forms of racism.

❝ The logical conclusion of antiracist strategy is open and equal access to all public accommodations, open access to all integrated White spaces, integrated Middle Eastern spaces, integrated Black spaces, integrated Latinx spaces, integrated Native spaces, and integrated Asian spaces that are as equally resourced as they are culturally different. All these spaces adjoin civic spaces of political and economic and cultural power, from a House of Representatives to a school board to a newspaper editorial board where no race predominates, where shared antiracist power predominates. This is diversity, something integrationists value only in name.

Related Characters: Dr. Ibram X. Kendi (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 180

Explanation and Analysis

Kendi opposes 20th-century integration policies not because he's a segregationist, but rather because he thinks that these policies integrated *people* while continuing to segregate *culture*. In other words, people of color either had to hide their own cultural norms and identities and assimilate into white spaces, or they had to accept that their own spaces would inevitably lack resources and opportunities relative to white spaces. Neither of these options is dignified or equitable.

This is why Kendi believes that true antiracism must combine the three principles he explains here: desegregation, integration, and racial solidarity. He doesn't think that protected racialized spaces should be *exclusive*—in other words, as he says here, everybody should be welcomed into "integrated White spaces, integrated Middle Eastern spaces, integrated Black spaces," and so on. He imagines these spaces as integrated both in terms of the people inside them and in terms of the cultural norms that underpin them. This is true antiracist diversity, predicated on a respect for different but equal cultures—not just equal access to white-dominated spaces.

Chapter 15: Sexuality Quotes

❝ I gobbled up Audre Lorde, E. Patrick Johnson, bell hooks, Joan Morgan, Dwight McBride, Patricia Hill Collins, and Kimberlé Crenshaw like my life depended on it. My life did depend on it. I wanted to overcome my gender racism, my queer racism. But I had to be willing to do for Black women and queer Blacks what I had been doing for Black men and Black heterosexuals, which meant first of all learning more—and then defending them like my heroes had.

Related Characters: Dr. Ibram X. Kendi (speaker), Kaila and Yaba

Related Themes:

Page Number: 198-9

Explanation and Analysis

In graduate school, as Kendi dedicated himself to understanding racism and sharpening his own vision of antiracism, he struggled to recognize and overcome his own sexism, homophobia, and transphobia. Although his parents were not particularly prejudiced, he explains, most corners of American culture are by default. Accordingly, while growing up as a heterosexual cisgender man, Kendi idly drifted toward sexism, homophobia, and transphobia. Until graduate school, he didn't realize that this would affect his ability to effectively teach antiracism to diverse audiences or prevent him from forming meaningful relationships with people of other genders and sexualities. So he was fortunate that Kaila and Yaba, two other students in his PhD program, were dedicated to exposing his prejudices and helping him educate himself about these prejudices and how they intersect with racism.

However, as Kendi explains here, his education was his own responsibility—not that of his female, non-heterosexual, or trans friends. He read voraciously in an attempt to understand their experiences, interests, and contributions to (but also exclusion from) social justice movements. This is his clearest model for how everyone who's just starting to think about race and racism should proceed: they must take the initiative to read widely and educate themselves, not blame others for things that they don't understand. They should appreciate and listen to advice from others, but they should never expect or feel entitled to this help. Indeed, Kendi views Kaila and Yaba's tough love as the model for how everyone who hopes to fight oppression should treat others: they were compassionate and supportive of his journey toward self-improvement, but they were brutally honest about whatever misogynistic and homophobic ideas he still held. They invited him into their world without

bending over backwards to accommodate him.

Chapter 16: Failure Quotes

To understand why racism lives is to understand the history of antiracist failure—why people have failed to create antiracist societies. To understand the racial history of failure is to understand failed solutions and strategies. To understand failed solutions and strategies is to understand their cradles: failed racial ideologies.

Related Characters: Dr. Ibram X. Kendi (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 201-2

Explanation and Analysis

After defining activism in terms of people's success in changing policy—not ideas—Kendi goes into more detail about the role that ideas *do* play. Specifically, Kendi explains that mistaken ideas about race and racism prevent antiracist policies from succeeding: inaccurate definitions of key concepts and misunderstandings of history lead people to get stuck pursuing unsuccessful strategies.

When Kendi argues that the battle between racist and antiracist ideas is only significant to the extent that it influences policy, he's essentially explaining the reason why he wrote this book. To many readers, it might seem ironic that a professor has spent years studying racism, just to tell them that education isn't the solution. But Kendi's point isn't that ideas are irrelevant; rather, it's that they're a necessary means to the real end, which is policy change. Critiquing, analyzing, and reflecting on racism is useful—but *only* critiquing, analyzing, and reflecting on racism is useless. In other words, activists should remember that ideas are there to serve a purpose in the real world. And in this passage, Kendi connects ideas to policies in order to offer the most direct and comprehensive picture of what lessons his research holds for antiracist activists and policymakers.

The problem of race has always been at its core the problem of power, not the problem of immorality or ignorance.

Related Characters: Dr. Ibram X. Kendi (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 208

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Kendi makes the important point that racism comes from power and self-interest, not "immorality or ignorance." This is the core principle behind *How to Be an Antiracist*, because it explains the mistaken assumptions that racist ideas (instead of racist polices) come first, and that people's prejudices and intentions (rather than the actual effects of the words and actions) are what determine whether or not they're racist. By treating racism as a problem of immorality, people assume that racists cannot be changed—so they antagonize, reject, and ostracize them instead of giving them evidence-based reasons to strive to be antiracist. But the other extreme is treating racism as a problem of ignorance and assuming that racists will always accept the scientific evidence, rather than finding new justifications for their commitment to racist policies.

Genuine antiracism emphasizes that people are neither set in stone nor completely amenable to evidence. Rather, they decide based on self-interest. For most people—including most white people—antiracism is actually the self-interested choice, because racism only serves the interests of a tiny elite. But actually building an antiracist movement requires focusing on *power*. This means seeing race as a power construct, grounding analysis in history and evidence instead of abstract theory, and trying to transform policies—not just ideas.

Chapter 18: Survival Quotes

Over time, the source of racist ideas became obvious, but I had trouble acknowledging it. The source did not fit my conception of racism, my racial ideology, my racial identity. I became a college professor to educate away racist ideas, seeing ignorance as the source of racist ideas, seeing racist ideas as the source of racist policies, seeing mental change as the principal solution, seeing myself, an educator, as the primary solver.

Related Characters: Dr. Ibram X. Kendi (speaker), Sadiqa

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 229

Explanation and Analysis

While researching his previous book *Stamped from the Beginning*, Kendi came to a difficult realization: he spent years of his life dedicated to the wrong antiracist strategy. Because he saw that racist ideas have always served to defend racist policies and racial inequities, he realized that it won't work to "educate away racist ideas." This is because new racist ideas will pop up to fill the vacuum and defend the same racial inequities in novel ways.

Kendi ties his former belief that racist ideas are the problem to his career as a professor. Just as racists believe in racist ideas because it serves their self-interest, Kendi believed that education was the solution to racism because he wanted to be an educator. He had it backwards: he chose his conclusions before his arguments, and his research forced him to reexamine his assumptions and redirect his energy. Therefore, Kendi shows that this broader principle about knowledge serving self-interest applies everywhere, not only to racism. His realization about the importance of policies over ideas is important as a description of how racism works. It's a message for academics and thinkers who hope to fight racism, but it's also a sign of Kendi's own personal transformation and a reminder that anyone can learn to abandon and make amends for their racism.

❝ Racism is one of the fastest-spreading and most fatal cancers humanity has ever known. It is hard to find a place where its cancer cells are not dividing and multiplying. There is nothing I see in our world today, in our history giving me hope that one day antiracists will win the fight, that one day the flag of antiracism will fly over a world of equity. What gives me hope is a simple truism. Once we lose hope, we are guaranteed to lose. But if we ignore the odds and fight to create an antiracist world, then we give humanity a chance to one day survive, a chance to live in communion, a chance to be forever free.

Related Characters: Dr. Ibram X. Kendi (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 238

Explanation and Analysis

In the closing lines of *How to Be an Antiracist*, Kendi implores his readers to be realistic but hopeful. Racism exists in human history, not human nature, which means that it's beatable. But that doesn't mean it's easy to beat. This is why Kendi compares racism to the cancer that had an 88-percent chance of killing him: there's cause for hope, but not necessarily optimism. Actually, if people have unrealistically high expectations about creating an antiracist world, they often give up when they realize that it's hard to achieve lasting change on a large scale. In particular, they have to change policies, not just hearts and minds, which can often seem like a daunting or impossible task. But hope is necessary, most of all because it compels people to organize themselves and pressure those in power to change the policies that determine which resources flow where.

This is why irrational hope can actually be part of a rational strategy: it's a powerful motivating force. Many Americans assume that progress is inevitable—or, on the flipside, they think that there's nothing they can do to improve the state of the world. But Kendi reminds his readers that they are actually radically free, as both individuals and communities. The future is not set in stone: it's up to present-day people to create it. Racists are organizing and pushing for more and more inequity, so antiracists need to meet the challenge and do the same. While racists have power and history on their side, antiracists have truth.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

RACIST INTRODUCTION

In high school, Ibram X. Kendi used to hate dressing up—so when he had to give a speech to 3,000 people as part of a county oratorical contest, he showed up in a colorful blazer and baggy pants. Unlike the other finalists, he was an average student. In fact, he was surprised to get into college at all. A few weeks earlier, his father had visited the school basketball court with an envelope: it was his offer of admission to Hampton University. Kendi cried tears of joy.

Kendi begins with a personal anecdote that illustrates how racism affects his everyday life and how he's managed to transform himself into an antiracist over the years. Kendi's choice of clothing at the high school speaking contest seems to confirm his suspicion that he's a misfit there. But the contrast of Kendi's clothing and grades alongside his participation in a prestigious oratory contest and admission to Hampton University also challenges common racist ideas about young African American people. Specifically, mainstream white culture tends to stereotype young Black men like him as poor or involved in crime. But by showing himself succeed in a public speaking contest and get into college, Kendi points out that this assumption is a racist lie. He thereby forces his readers to consider their own racist assumptions about young Black men who underperform in school and wear baggy pants.

Kendi used to consider himself "too stupid" to go to college, because he wrongly thought that grades and test scores objectively measured intelligence. But now, many years later, Kendi understands that his subpar academic performance in high school was about a lack of *interest*, not a lack of *ability*. And if he knew more about American history, Kendi would have also understood why the town where he lived—Manassas, Virginia—was full of Confederate monuments. His school was even named for the Confederate General Stonewall Jackson.

Kendi is essentially admitting his past racism: he accepted racist assumptions about why Black students perform worse in certain academic settings. He wasn't racist because he hated Black people like himself, but simply because ideas like this have been normalized in American society. In retrospect, Kendi can recognize the underlying social influences that made him disinterested in school. He also implies that naming a high school after a Confederate general could have a detrimental impact on Black students whose ancestors were enslaved in the Confederacy.

Kendi felt a rush of self-confidence while delivering his speech. During this period of his life, it's difficult to say whether his low self-esteem made him look down on Black people in general, or his racist ideas about Black people made him look down on himself. This cycle of negative thinking is common: upon hearing racist ideas, people of color's self-esteem worsens and white people's improves, which in turn makes both groups more likely to accept more racist ideas. In Kendi's case, the media (and his own community) constantly sent the message that Black kids were bad students. This led him to expect that he'd fail in school, and when he did, it reinforced his belief that Black people were bad students. Instead of breaking the cycle, he internalized the racist ideas that fed it.

Kendi uses psychological research about how different people respond to racism in order to explain why racist ideas are so attractive to dominant groups, like white people in the United States. Essentially, they make people in these groups feel superior. And by accepting that subordinate groups are less powerful because they are somehow inferior, dominant groups justify inequity and paint an unjust world as just. But these racist ideas harm subordinate groups, helping to create the inequities that dominant groups cite as evidence for them in the first place.

During his speech, Kendi evoked Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. to argue that young Black people were falling behind because they did not value education, family planning, or middle-class jobs. The audience loved this message, but Kendi explains that it was a racist idea: by suggesting that something was wrong with Black people as a collective, he implied that Black people were an inferior racial group. Like all racist ideas, this leads blaming people, not policy, for racial inequities. Kendi believes that this is what Donald Trump was doing when he said that Black people are lazy and that Latinx immigrants were criminals. And all the while, he insisted he's "the least racist person." This is normal: people who hold racist ideas and push racist policies usually claim to be "not racist."

Ironically, Kendi's success in the oratorical contest disproves the message of personal responsibility that he was preaching. He even used this same idea to explain his own academic underachievement in the past—but in his speech, he suddenly decided that he was better than the rest of the young Black people surrounding him. Unlike Donald Trump, however, Kendi does not try to defend what he said—rather, he is willing to accept criticism and change. He recognizes that a lot of mainstream ideas are racist, and that almost everyone believes in some racist ideas.

But according to Kendi, there's no such thing as being "not racist." Rather, people can be racist (which means that they believe in a racial hierarchy) or antiracist (which means that they believe that racial groups are fundamentally equal). Racists blame people for racial inequities, while antiracists blame racist policies for inequities and try to change them. There is no neutral middle ground. People only claim to be "not racist" when they feel attacked. But "racist" is not a slur or personal attack: it's a descriptive term for certain ways of thinking and acting. Similarly, when people claim to be "color-blind" or not see race, they are really saying that they want to ignore racial inequities and allow them to continue. In fact, the Supreme Court used exactly this defense to legalize Jim Crow segregation in the landmark 1896 case *Plessy v. Ferguson*.

Kendi's argument that everything is either racist or antiracist might sound extreme or oversimplified at first. But he isn't saying that everything is all good or all evil; that everyone is either with him or against him; or that antiracists all have to follow a specific code of acceptable thoughts and behaviors. Rather, he's making the point that there's no neutral middle ground between equality and inequality: people either believe that different racial groups are equal, or they believe that they're unequal. Additionally, Kendi makes the point that nobody can ever be "not racist." Racism already exists, and people must choose to either go along with it or actively reject it.

"Racist" and "antiracist" are descriptive terms for people's behavior, not permanent identities for people themselves. People are capable of transformation—Kendi was often very racist in the past. He claimed to be race-neutral, and he blamed racial groups themselves for racial inequities. Expecting white people to view him as a representative for all Black people, he tried to present himself as favorably as possible in hopes of fighting racism. But in reality, no individual represents their whole race, and nobody is responsible for undoing anyone else's racist ideas. Kendi himself went through anti-Black racism and then anti-white racism before becoming an antiracist. This shows that racists can absolutely change—but they must learn to view inequities in terms of racist power and racist politics rather than blaming them on racial groups' inherent characteristics.

Kendi isn't arguing that society should blacklist or relentlessly attack everyone who says or does racist things. Rather, he's arguing that racism is extraordinarily common and that, in most cases, people don't consciously choose to believe it. They're not racists because they're evil—some people are racist because it benefits them, and many more are racist simply because they've learned racist ideas from their culture. True antiracists focus on condemning racist actions and words, but also on giving people the chance to grow and change.

CHAPTER 1: DEFINITIONS

Dr. Kendi lays out his definitions of racism and antiracism: someone is being racist if their actions, inaction, or expression of racist ideas supports racist policy. Someone is being antiracist if their actions or expression of antiracist ideas support antiracist policies.

Kendi opens most of his chapters by defining key terms, as he believes that people's difficulty talking about race often stems from their inability to clearly agree on what they are actually talking about. Notably, his definitions of racist and antiracist people are entirely about the observable effects of their actions and words—not about their intentions or their inner selves. This is because racism exists in the world, not in people's heads.

In 1970, Kendi's mom and dad spent 24 hours on a bus to attend a conference where the band Soul Liberation was performing and the Black liberation theology preacher Tom Skinner was speaking. Thousands of students, both Black and white, danced joyously to Soul Liberation's song "Power to the People" and then listened to Tom Skinner talk about his personal transformation. When he was young, the church taught him that Jesus was white and that salvation meant following the rules. But when Skinner grew up, he realized that Jesus was a revolutionary who dedicated himself to fighting for justice and equality, which is true Christianity. Enthralled, Kendi's parents joined the Black Power movement and became organizers in their colleges and churches. Kendi's father never forgot how scholar James Cone defined Christianity when they met: "striving for liberation."

Kendi's parents' experience shows that antiracism is not an abstract academic exercise but rather a way of relating to others. Specifically, they saw that Christianity's foundational values—justice, liberation, and compassion—are also the values that drive antiracist activism. Tom Skinner's reexamination of Jesus shows how reflection and analysis can lead people to new concepts that, in turn, transform their actions. Antiracism calls for the same process—definitions and ideas are important, but only as a means to activism.


Kendi grew up with this liberation-focused definition of Christianity, and he can trace his understanding of antiracism directly back to it. While often overlooked, defining key terms is an essential first step to becoming antiracist. This is because definitions help people commit to consistent principles and goals. The most important definitions are racism; antiracism; and racist or antiracist policies, ideas, and people.

In his introduction, Kendi pointed out that people tend to assume being called "racist" is a personal insult, so they react strongly in a way that shuts down conversations about race. Here, he is returning to the same idea: until people fundamentally understand what racism is and what they can do about it, they're unlikely to do anything at all.


Racism occurs when racist policies and racist ideas come together to create and normalize racial inequity. To understand racism, one first needs to understand racist policies, racist ideas, and especially racial inequities.

It make seem like a contradiction for Kendi to use the word "racist" in his definition of racism, but Kendi is characterizing racism as a complex societal system—not just the individual prejudices or assumptions that make someone a racist. Racism (as a social system) isn't racist because it includes racist ideas and policies. Rather, certain ideas and policies are part of the social system called racism, and that's what makes them racist.


Racial inequity means that different racial groups do not have "approximately equal" standing in some important aspect of life, while racial equity means that they do.

Equity and inequity are the basic measure of whether or not a society treats different groups of people fairly. Although different scholars distinguish equity from equality in a variety of different ways, Kendi uses equality to talk about people's inherent value and equity to talk about people's outcomes in life. Notably, Kendi avoids the framing of "equal opportunities" versus "equal outcomes." He believes that equal opportunities should always yield equal outcomes, and that suggesting otherwise is tied to the racist notion that some groups are inherently better than others.

Racist policies promote or maintain inequity, while antiracist policies promote or maintain equity. Every policy does one or the other, whether it's a formal law or an unwritten rule. The popular terms "systemic racism," "structural racism," and "institutional racism" are just fancy synonyms for "racist policy."

Kendi is talking about both enforceable rules (like laws or company policies) and unwritten norms (like who is willing to rent to whom, or who is more likely to get a bank loan). Kendi isn't saying that all inequity is caused by government policy (although much of it is)—he chooses to talk about policy because it's easier to identify and change specific policies than trying to tackle vague systems, structures, or institutions.

Another popular term is "racial discrimination," which just means treating people differently based on race. However, focusing on individual acts of discrimination often distracts from the real source of racial inequities: racist policies and the people who write them. Moreover, when people focus on racial discrimination, they often imply that discrimination is inherently racist. But Kendi explains that it isn't: if discrimination creates inequity, it's racist. But if discrimination creates equity, it's antiracist. "Race-neutral" people who argue against *all* discrimination actually pose the greatest obstacle to racial equity: they oppose antiracist discrimination, which Kendi believes is the only way to remedy racist discrimination that happened in the past. Such people also tend to support racist policies (like biased standardized testing) that create inequity while not explicitly mentioning race.

Again, Kendi's defense of racial discrimination (for the purposes of antiracism) might surprise readers who instinctively associate the word "discrimination" with segregation and oppression. But since Kendi argues that a policy is racist or antiracist depending on its outcome, not its stated intent, he believes that discrimination can be racist or antiracist, as it can either hurt or help racial minorities. For instance, affirmative action admissions policies are often accused of discriminating against white or Asian American people in favor of accepting other minorities into college. But Kendi wouldn't characterize such discrimination as racist, because these policies were implemented to remedy past discrimination against African American and American Indian people.

Next, Kendi defines a racist idea as "any idea that suggests one racial group is inferior or superior to another." An antiracist idea insists on the opposite: that all racial groups are equal despite their differences.

Racist ideas serve to justify racial inequities by blaming them on the inferior qualities of the groups that have worse life outcomes, rather than the policies that create unequal life outcomes for otherwise equally capable and deserving groups of people. Notably, antiracists do not overlook all differences, but they believe that these differences shouldn't make some groups more valuable or deserving of a good life than others.

Having defined racial equities and inequities, racist and antiracist policies, and racist and antiracist ideas, Kendi returns to his original definitions. Racism is a set of racist policies, justified by racist ideas, that produces racial inequity. Antiracism is a set of antiracist policies, justified by antiracist ideas, that produces racial equity.

In returning to his basic definition, Kendi points out that the different parts of racism come together in a specific order: first, policies create certain equitable or inequitable outcomes. Then, ideas emerge to blame inequities on an inherent differences in value on the basis of race, rather than blaming the policies that actually caused these differences.

Kendi demonstrates how his definitions can help us analyze racial inequities. His grandparents brought his mother from Georgia to New York in the 1950s because Georgia's climate was getting hotter, which made picking cotton intolerable. They were fleeing climate change, which disproportionately affects people of color. Then, two of his grandparents died unexpectedly within a few days of each other, which reminds him that African American people live shorter lives, suffer more infant mortality and **cancer**, and disproportionately lack health insurance. Meanwhile, racist policy has always ensured that people of color are underrepresented in government. After decades of Jim Crow (segregation) laws, mass incarceration and voter-ID laws now disenfranchise them. For example, Wisconsin's voter-ID law, which targeted people of color, prevented 200,000 people from casting ballots in 2016. (Donald Trump won the state by just 22,748 votes.)

Kendi's point is not that climate change somehow targeted his mom, or that racism gave his grandparents cancer. Rather, he's talking about problems that disproportionately affect certain groups due to social and economic inequality. It's only possible to determine equity or inequity based on statistical group averages, not individual anecdotes. But Kendi uses personal anecdotes to show how racism is far more complex and wide-reaching than individual people's prejudice against other individuals. Rather, it's a complex system of racist ideas, reinforced by racist polices, that trickles down to affect individuals like Kendi's family members.

These examples show that racial inequities are everywhere in contemporary America. People either reinforce them or fight them—they are either racist or antiracist. But Kendi believes that these labels are fluid: whether someone is being racist or antiracist depends on what they are saying, doing, or promoting. People can change through careful self-reflection. American culture treats many racist ideas as common sense, which makes them easy to absorb. Antiracism requires learning to accept people's differences while refusing to put different groups into a hierarchy.

Kendi again emphasizes that antiracists have to view human nature as adaptable rather than rigid. Villainizing unwittingly racist people is useless—not only do most people hold some racist beliefs, but everyone has the capacity to change them. Earlier in the book, Kendi himself admitted to believing racist ideas, yet this does not disqualify him from being antiracist now. By treating racism and antiracism as innate qualities (rather than positions that people constantly move between), antiracists actually perpetuate racism by alienating potential allies.

CHAPTER 2: DUELING CONSCIOUSNESS

Kendi defines the terms assimilationism and segregationism as they relate to antiracism. Assimilationists think that certain groups are inferior and thus try to change those groups and make them resemble dominant groups. Segregationists think that certain groups are inferior, but cannot be improved, and thus should be separated from the dominant group. Antiracists, on the other hand, believe in equality among all racial groups and try to promote racial equity.

After defining racism in a theoretical way in the previous chapter, Kendi now looks at the practical policies and ideas that racists defend. Segregationist and assimilationist ideas are both racist because they're based on the notion of a hierarchy of human value—even though assimilationists often have good intentions and think that they're fighting for equality.

Kendi was born in 1982, just after President Ronald Reagan announced his war on drug crime. Over the next two decades, the American prison population quadrupled because of longer sentences. Black and Latinx Americans are disproportionately likely to serve these sentences, even though they sell and use drugs at lower rates than white Americans. Richard Nixon pioneered this strategy in 1971, when he started inventing drug charges against Black activists who opposed him. But many Black activists turned around and supported the same racist policies during the 1980s: they called for harsher policing and decried "Black on Black crime." Even Kendi's mom and dad blamed racial inequity on Black people's laziness and "ghetto culture." In reality, Reagan's policies accelerated inequality and unemployment, which led to an increase in crime. But most people still blame people, not policy, for this crime wave.

Kendi believes that the War on Drugs, a set of policies that harshened penalties for drug crimes, is racist because it created a racial inequity. Black and Latinx Americans have been disproportionately incarcerated compared to the amount of crimes they commit. As Kendi explained in the previous chapter, racist ideas about "Black on Black crime" and "ghetto culture" followed these racist policies as a way of justifying the visible inequities they caused. Kendi thus argues that it's only possible to determine whether a policy is racist by its results, not its stated intent.

Kendi admits that his mom and dad chose "civilizer theology" over liberation theology. Despite wanting to be missionaries or poets, they took middle-class corporate jobs and surrounded themselves with white people instead. They developed a "dueling consciousness": they saw themselves both through their own eyes and through the gaze of mainstream white society, and they struggled to choose between antiracism and assimilationism. But Kendi points out that assimilationism is racist: it suggests that one racial group should imitate another, superior one. Kendi has fond memories of his family's church, but it reinforced their dueling consciousness. It preached both the antiracist idea that Black people should fight white supremacy and the assimilationist belief that they needed to change their culture and behavior in order to better themselves.

"Civilizer theology" is an assimilationist idea, while liberation theology was an antiracist one. Kendi's parents essentially chose the assimilationist route because they tried to live like middle-class white people, hoping that this would save them from racism and give their Black children the same privileges that middle-class white children have. But Kendi's reference to dueling consciousness makes it clear that segregationism, assimilationism, and antiracism are not mutually exclusive: people often mix them together, just like most people have some racist beliefs and some antiracist ones.

Kendi notes that white people also often suffer dueling consciousness: they get caught between segregationism and assimilationism, which are both racist ideas. Assimilationists want to help people of color improve—which they define as resembling white people. But segregationists see people of color as subhuman "animals" who need to be controlled or separated from white society. For example, Enlightenment philosopher David Hume was a segregationist: he thought non-white people could never be "civilized." In contrast, Thomas Jefferson was an assimilationist: he argued that "all men are created equal" but thought people of color were "temporarily inferior" to white people and could become equal over time. Assimilationist policies aim to improve and integrate racial groups, while segregationist policies try to subordinate, isolate, or destroy them. On the other hand, antiracist policies assume that everyone is "already civilized" and try to foster racial equity.

David Hume and Thomas Jefferson's beliefs show how deeply racist thinking is embedded in Western history. Jefferson is almost always remembered for the line "all men are created equal" in the Declaration of Independence but almost never for calling Black people "temporarily inferior." This shows how racist thinking also affects the way we interpret and evaluate history.

The duel between white segregationism and assimilationism, like the duel between Black assimilationism and antiracism, has played out throughout history. There has been "antiracist progress" as well as "racist progress." White people oscillate between assimilationism and segregationism, and Black people sometimes try to assimilate, only to find themselves rejected by segregationists. Kendi believes that the solution is antiracism, which implies that being American does not mean being white—or trying to resemble white people.

Kendi responds to the common misconception that history automatically arcs toward justice by explaining that both racists and antiracists have been able to adapt and evolve throughout history. They have given America its own kind of dueling consciousness: both sides are constantly trying to outmaneuver the other. By understanding the basic templates for racist thinking over time—segregationism and assimilationism—antiracists can more easily identify and refute new racist ideas.

CHAPTER 3: POWER

Kendi defines race as "a power construct of collected or merged difference that lives socially."

Kendi's definition of race has three major components: first, race is "a power construct"—it is an idea created by those in power (not by society as a whole, and not by biology). Secondly, it is based on "collected or merged difference," which means that it lumps together a large group of people based on the ways they differ from those who develop the idea of race. And thirdly, it "lives socially," which means that, after those in power create it, the concept of race circulates throughout the rest of society.

Kendi remembers visiting an elementary school in the suburbs when he was seven. Like many American parents, his mom and dad didn't want him to attend his neighborhood elementary school, where the students were mainly poor and Black. Kendi asked why the suburban school only had one Black teacher. He explains why: he spent his childhood reading biographies of Black political and cultural leaders and was already going through "racial puberty," or becoming aware of how race and racism shape society.

Kendi's process of "racial puberty" reveals how Americans learn the social codes of race and racism over time. One example is this common division of educational resources in the United States, in which schools in poorer neighborhoods have less *funding than those in the suburbs. It's also far more common to see white teachers teaching Black students than Black teachers teaching white students. These divisions reflect, reinforce, and normalize the racist hierarchy that considers Black people inferior to white people.*

Race is a very powerful force, but it's also "a mirage." When Kendi calls himself Black, he's not saying that "Blackness, or race, is a meaningful scientific category." Rather, race is a product of history—especially the history of racist policies. By identifying as Black, Kendi aligns himself with other Black people, marginalized groups, and struggles for justice. Meanwhile, whiteness is considered a neutral or default identity in the United States, so many white people never have to think about what it means to be white or recognize the advantages that whiteness gives them. Ultimately, all racial identities are products of power. In other words, race is a way of dividing people into groups, which allows those in power to treat these groups differently.

Kendi makes the point that race is both real and a "mirage": it is a made-up construct, but it has significant power to shape people's lives and the physical world. Many people have difficulty recognizing that both of these things are true at the same time. For instance, people who claim to be "color-blind" assume that, because race is made up by people, it doesn't have any effects, while people who see racial differences all around them assume that race must be biological or genetic. When Kendi explains his Blackness, however, he does so in a purely social way: it's about political, historical, and community ties. But he clarifies that it's misleading to just call race social, *because this implies that everyone in society created it together. Rather, it specifically came from those in* power.

The construct of race first emerged in 15th-century in Portugal. Until that point, anyone could be enslaved in Europe—but Prince Henry the Navigator realized that it would be more profitable to stop dealing with middlemen and instead send ships to directly enslave people in West Africa. Prince Henry's biographer, Gomes de Zurara, grouped all of these African people together—regardless of the color of their skin, the language they spoke, or their ethnic identities.

Kendi shows that it's not human nature to divide people by race—rather, this has a specific historical start date. Like all racist ideas, the first racial categories were a way for powerful people to justify violent and unequal policies. Specifically, Gomes de Zurara lumped all Africans together in order to paint Prince Henry's slave auction as a justifiable venture.

The word "race" came into common usage about a century later, as a way to create a ranked hierarchy of different kinds of people. But Gomes de Zurara's hierarchy was "the first racist idea." He compared Africans to animals who lacked reason and morality. The Spanish and Portuguese eventually applied the same logic in the Americas. They labeled all the indigenous people they encountered as "Indians" and then argued that Black people were strong—natural laborers to be enslaved—while Indians were weak—and naturally deserved extermination. The modern four-way racial hierarchy emerged in 1755, when Carl Linnaeus divided the world into "White, Yellow, Red, and Black" people and, unsurprisingly, put white Europeans on top. Next were "strict, haughty, greedy" Asians; then "ill-tempered, impassive" indigenous Americans; and finally "crafty, slow, careless" Africans.

It's misleading to just say that racism facilitated European slavery and colonialism—rather, colonialism and slavery invented racism in the first place. Our modern-day concepts of race are really just artifacts from this history. Before the 15th century, human beings certainly interacted with people from other groups, but there wasn't an all-encompassing classification system that would slot every single person into one of four races. Notably, the personality traits that Linnaeus attached to his early racial hierarchy are still common racist stereotypes. It's clear that Linnaeus formulated them in order to justify European domination over the rest of the world.

Gomes de Zurara used the concept of race to argue that Prince Henry was *civilizing* African people by enslaving them, not just exploiting them for profit. This would improve Prince Henry's reputation and defend him from criticism. Kendi explains that this is usually how racist power, policies, and ideas relate: "a racist power creates racist policies out of raw self-interest [and] the racist policies necessitate racist ideas to justify them." Most people have it backwards—they think that hate and ignorance create racist ideas, which lead to racist policies. But, in reality, racist power's self-interest always comes first.

Gomes de Zurara's argument that slavery was a way of improving Black people became a common assimilationist refrain for several centuries. But Kendi explains that people don't recite this idea because they genuinely want to "civilize" Black people. Rather, they are protecting their own "raw self-interest." Racist ideas generally take this form: they have an apparent motive (in this case, civilizing and improving an inferior race) and a real, unspoken motive of self-interest.

Kendi returns to his memory of visiting the suburban elementary school and asking the sole Black teacher why there were no others. She replied that the school hadn't hired any, and she didn't know why. Kendi was confused, but his dad changed the subject. Kendi ended up in a different school.

Like many Americans, the adults in the room didn't know how to talk about the obvious racial inequity in front of them: the school's lack of Black teachers. Kendi was starting to become aware of racism at this age, so he could tell that something was wrong even though he couldn't articulate it. In sharing this anecdote, Kendi implies that it's important for the racial makeup of a school's teaching staff to reflect that of its student body.

CHAPTER 4: BIOLOGY

Kendi defines biological racists as those whose words or actions express the notion that there are meaningful biological differences among racial groups, which justify ranking them in a hierarchy of value. Biological antiracists, on the other hand, reject the idea that racial differences are biological or genetic.

Biological racism is the first and most historically powerful of the several kinds of racist ideas that Kendi describes in the following chapters. Here, he defines biological racism in terms of what ideas people express, not in terms of what they directly say. This is because people often implicitly believe in biologically racist ideas that they would never publicly defined. Sometimes, they might not even realize that their thinking is biologically racist.

Kendi doesn't remember his racist, white third-grade teacher's name. He remembers her as just another white person, but he now realizes that the problem wasn't her *whiteness*—it was her *racism*. Kendi's teacher punished and ignored her Black students while showering her white students with attention and praise. Such racism from teachers is common—Kendi cites this as the reason why Black kids are suspended four times as often as white kids in the United States. Kendi remembers that one of his classmates, a shy Black girl, raised her hand for the first time—the teacher saw and ignored her.

Again, Kendi's childhood memories show how racism is woven into everyday life in the United States, to the point that discrimination from authority figures is just part of growing up for Black students. Notably, Kendi's teacher didn't seem to understand that she was favoring the white students—her racist preference was practically an unconscious reflex. She thus represents of the numerous Americans who express racist ideas and support racist policies without realizing what they're doing. One of Kendi's goals is to help his readers uncover and transform their own racist assumptions.

This is what scholars call a "microaggression": the constant, everyday racist abuse that people of color suffer. Kendi prefers the term "racial abuse" because "microaggression" has become politically charged, and the prefix "micro" wrongly implies that constant abuse is no big deal.

Just like the term "structural racism" and calls for equality instead of equity, Kendi believes that the word "microaggression" is too complicated for its own good. He prefers to use direct and unambiguous terminology because he wants to make antiracism clear and accessible to people, so that it can be a widespread popular movement (not an obscure academic theory).

After his teacher ignored the shy Black girl, Kendi was furious and staged a protest: after church, he refused to return to class. He knows that his teacher would have approached him empathetically if he were white, but instead she viewed his actions "as misbehavior, not distress." She grabbed him and called the principal. He notes that he saw Black and white kids as like "a different species," which is the hallmark of biological racism. Biological racists believe that there are meaningful biological differences among races and that there is a "hierarchy of value" based on these differences. Many people casually believe in the first half of the equation without realizing that it implies the second. For instance, they might believe that Black people are naturally better athletes and musical improvisers.

When Kendi tries to protest, racist stereotypes cut off his teacher's ability to emphasize with him. According to these stereotypes, an unruly white child is suffering problems and needs consolation, while an unruly Black childhood is misbehaving and needs punishment. With these assumptions, racist adults are willing to blame circumstances for white people's problems while blaming Black people for their own problems. Meanwhile, Kendi admits that he, too, thought of races as "species" at this age, which shows how easy it is to fall into biologically racist thinking.

Although the Bible teaches that all humans share ancestry, the Bible still became the basis for biological racism. Many Europeans interpreted the story of Canaan—who was cursed and doomed to slavery—to characterize dark skin as evidence of the Curse and thus justify their enslavement of Black people. Others proclaimed that American Indians were not descended from Adam (the biblical first man and father of humankind) at all.

This complicated and improbable interpretation of the Bible shows how flexible racist thinking can be: once a person committed to the idea of a racial hierarchy, they can easily find clues that confirm their suspicions. The idea that Black people are cursed to slavery isn't logical, but it served to justify racist Europeans' opinions that non-white people were naturally inferior.

After 19th-century biologist Charles Darwin showed that humans *do* share a common ancestor, race became a question of science rather than religion. Still, Europeans argued that they were the most evolved branch of humanity. Scientists promoted eugenics, or selective breeding to promote white genes and eliminate non-white genes. This was the foundation of the Nazis' racial policy, and it was only widely rejected after World War II. In other words, biological racism spent 400 years in the mainstream, which explains its profound influence on popular culture. Even after the Human Genome Project showed that all humans' genes are 99.9 percent identical, people continue to argue that race affects genes and behavior. In reality, "racial ancestry" does not exist. And *ethnic* ancestry, while real, doesn't support theories of race—for instance, West African groups are genetically closer to Western European groups than East African groups.

Race has no scientific basis, yet the centuries-long prevalence of eugenics shows how powerfully the idea of race captivates people and twists their thinking. It even makes expert scientists violate their disciplines' most basic assumptions and values. Although many scientists spent their lives trying to map out exact racial divisions, none of them were successful, because they were trying to find biological proof for a purely social idea. Because there is no such thing as "racial ancestry," it is impossible to explain observed differences among racial groups through genetics. This is why it would be wrong, for instance, to say that Black people are naturally *better athletes: this argument implies that there is some unique genetic category of Black people, when in reality, there isn't. If racial groups were based on genetic similarity, West Africans and Western Europeans would be part of the same racial group. But in reality, the only genes that all Black people share are the ones that all human beings share.*

While those who believe in genetic racial differences are segregationists, people who use biology to justify ignoring race are assimilationists. Even though race is an illusion, the world is still organized around it, and it's impossible to address racial inequities without talking about race. Kendi believes that getting rid of racial categories is the *last* step in achieving racial equity, not the first.

Here, Kendi is talking about the assimilationist argument that, because everyone is part of the same human race, it makes no sense to talk about racial differences or inequities. Kendi doesn't want people to use biology to enforce racial divisions, but he also doesn't want people to use biology to say that race doesn't or cannot exist. Race is social, not biological, so biology should totally stay out of conversations about race. In Kendi's view, it's necessary to recognize the social reality of race and racism, but genetics and biology are irrelevant.

In third grade, after his protest in the church, Kendi was surprised when the principal addressed him with genuine empathy. Kendi's mother later told him to be careful when protesting. But it worked: the principal persuaded Kendi's teacher to stop punishing non-white students so harshly. Still, Kendi soon switched schools, where he was exposed to an entirely new racial dynamic.

Kendi's protest worked—as a young child, he had far more power to stop racism than he realized. His principal's response to the situation shows how antiracist educators can radically improve educational experiences of students for color. And his teacher's response shows that even committed, habitual racists can change their ways and move toward antiracism with the right support.

CHAPTER 5: ETHNICITY

Kendi defines ethnic racism and ethnic antiracism, which involve policies and ideas that create inequities among "racialized ethnic groups," not just races.

In this chapter, Kendi talks about inequities among "racialized ethnic groups" (rather than just ethnicities). He uses this phrase because he wants to emphasize how race and ethnic identity intersect to produce different experiences within the same racial group.

Kendi remembers teasing other students in middle school, and then he remembers being confused after the verdict of the O.J. Simpson trial. Even if they thought O.J. was guilty, the adults in his community knew that the criminal justice system treats Black Americans unfairly, especially by failing to prosecute police officers who murder Black people. The police view Black people the same way, whether they grew up in the United States or immigrated there. But Kendi and his U.S.-born peers didn't: they made cruel jokes about Black immigrant kids, like their Ghanaian classmate Kwame.

While the O.J. Simpson trial is about race, *Kendi's jokes about Kwame are about* ethnicity. *Both Kendi and Kwame are Black, but Kendi is African American, while Kwame is a Ghanaian immigrant. In general, ethnicity refers to a group's shared cultural or national heritage. While race is an all-encompassing taxonomy that tries to fit everybody into a certain set of categories, ethnicity describes the way people themselves think about their cultural background. People can have more than one ethnic identity, and there is no fixed set of ethnic categories.*

These ethnically racist jokes originated in slavery: enslavers divided Africa into various ethnic groups and invented complex pseudoscientific explanations for why certain groups were stronger, weaker, or better suited for different kinds of work. Meanwhile, Kendi and his friends blamed Africans like Kwame for selling "their own people" into slavery. Of course, this animosity is based on the modern idea that all Africans belong to the same race, whereas during the slave trade, Africans had no concept of race: they defined themselves by ethnic groups.

Just like all other racist ideas, ethnic racism begins as a way for powerful people to justify and sustain their power. Then, ethnically racist ideas take on a life of their own as they begin to circulate in society. There is a direct link between the jokes Kendi made in the early 1990s and the pseudoscientific classification used to justify slavery centuries ago. Kendi misunderstood the actual history of Africans' participation in slavery because, like most Americans, he assumed that the concept of race is timeless and natural, rather than understanding that it wasn't invented until the slave trade began.

For several decades, the majority of immigrants to the United States have been non-white. Kendi grew up surrounded by West Indian immigrants, but there was a gulf between them and the African American community. The groups clashed and held negative stereotypes about each other. Notably, his parents never grew up around Black immigrants, who only came to the United States because the government made a concerted effort to reverse its previous racist preference for Northern Europeans from the 1880s through 1965. At the time that Kendi was writing *How to be an Antiracist*, Donald Trump's administration was trying to return to this older policy, based the racist idea that being American means being white.

The nuanced relationships between different immigrant and ethnic communities often get lost in national debates about race. But it goes the other way too: racism has always strongly influenced immigration policy in the United States and therefore shaped the nation's ethnic composition. In other words, Kendi emphasizes that racist policies are not an exception in U.S. history, but rather the foundation of this history. Donald Trump's attempts to reverse open immigration are an example of what Kendi calls "racist progress"—the creation of new racist policies and ideas for new political contexts. In order to stop this, antiracists also need to develop innovative new strategies for identifying and responding to racist progress.

In the United States today, African and West Indian immigrants are viewed as Black. This is a result of complex and specific patterns of racialization throughout American history, which have always created ethnic hierarchies within racial hierarchies (like the hierarchy of Anglo-Saxon people above Irish and Jewish people, although all are white). The constant question "Where are you from?" often shows how pervasive specifically ethnic racism can be. Kendi frequently gets this question from people who assume that, as a respected professor, he must be an immigrant and not African American.

Racialization is the process by which individuals (or entire ethnic groups) get assigned to a specific racial category. The fact that these categories shift over time is another piece of evidence that race is a social category, not a biological one. Specifically, the ethnic hierarchy within each racial hierarchy shifts depending on power structures—which shows that it's just another example of a racist idea.

Kendi frequently sees ethnic racism among his students. After one Ghanaian American student delivered a monologue full of degrading stereotypes about African American people, Kendi asked him what stereotypes British people held about Ghanaian people. The student realized that his beliefs about African American people followed the same pattern. He absorbed these ideas from the West African people surrounding him, who in turn absorbed them from white Americans. Remembering how he harassed Kwame in eighth grade, Kendi concludes that ethnic racism is always based on a double standard: people dish it out and suffer it at the same time, without seeing that others' false ideas about them are the same as their own false ideas about other groups.

Kendi makes it clear that even committed antiracist students fall back into racist patterns of thinking about ethnicity. This suggests that, while they might understand specific racist ideas, they do not see the deeper pattern that makes these ideas racist: they establish a hierarchy of human value. This leads people to both suffer and perpetuate ethnic racism, simply because they assume that ethnicities *can be ranked hierarchically, even if they know that* races *cannot.*

Many ethnically racist ideas are widely popular. For instance, Black immigrants have higher average incomes than African Americans, which is often viewed as evidence that racism does not really exist. (Other disparities disprove this claim: despite being the most educated immigrant group, Black people suffer the highest unemployment among immigrants.) Black immigrants' success is not about ethnic superiority. Rather, it is because of immigrant self-selection: migrants tend to care more about economic advancement and/or have more resources to draw upon, compared to non-migrants. All over the world, immigrants are "more resilient and resourceful" than native-born residents because of self-selection. Ultimately, ethnic racism—like when Kendi yelled "*Ref-u-gee!*" at Kwame in eighth grade—only divides native-born and immigrant communities, which harms both sides.

With his of counterexample comparing Black and non-Black immigrants, Kendi points out that comparing Black immigrants to African American people says nothing about Black people's equity with other *groups in the United States. Instead, it just proves that there are variations in achievement between different ethnicities within the umbrella of the Black race. The principle of immigrant self-selection might seem like a stereotype, but it's borne out by evidence, and it clearly explains the observed effect. It doesn't make logical sense to say that Black people are hardworking, because someone's race tells us nothing about their personal qualities. Someone's decision to emigrate, on the other hand, does: since they are making a difficult, deliberate choice to improve their lives, they're likely to be willing to do other difficult things to improve their lives. However, Kendi emphasizes that their higher rates of achievement do not make them* superior *to non-immigrants—rather, he thinks that all human beings are inherently valuable.*

CHAPTER 6: BODY

A bodily racist sees certain racialized bodies as animalistic and violent, while a bodily antiracist insists on "humanizing, deracializing, and individualizing" people's behavior.

In this chapter, Kendi talks about the racist ideas that spring to many people's minds when they see certain racialized others. He contrasts racist thinking, which views individuals in terms of the groups or types they embody, with antiracist thinking, which rejects any link between race and individual behavior. This also means that there should also be no link between seeing certain racialized people and feeling scared or threatened—and antiracists actively work to overcome this prejudice.

As a kid, Kendi was excited to switch from his private middle school to a public high school, where he wouldn't have to wear a uniform. But it wasn't all for the better: he also remembers when a kid nicknamed Smurf pulled out a gun on the school bus and stuck it in Kendi's face.

Smurf's behavior closely resembles the worst racist stereotypes about young Black men, which portray them as unempathetic, violent criminals. However, as Kendi already outlined, antiracists learn to blame individual behaviors on individuals, not on entire races of people.

In 1995, Bill Clinton said that white people see violence as having "a Black face," something that racists have consistently thought since the 1600s. This association between Blackness and violence is one of the reasons that American society has controlled, lynched, segregated, and incarcerated Black people over the centuries.

The problem with bodily racism isn't just that it is illogical and unfair—it's also that racist people and institutions act on the false sense of threat they perceive when they see Black people. As a result, policymakers create institutions designed to imprison and control people of color.

Growing up, Kendi's mom and dad even tried to dissuade him from playing basketball, because they thought the neighbors were too dangerous. This taught Kendi to fear other Black people—including Smurf, who frightened him with the gun. Kendi was constantly scared at his new school: he thought accidentally bumping into or making eye contact with the wrong person would get him attacked. (It never did.) There was no real danger: rather, he was just afraid of the racist ideas in his head.

Kendi clarifies that Black people also *fear other Black people and view them as inherently threatening. As he emphasizes throughout the book, it's a mistake to assume that only white people are racist. Kendi's fear in high school attests to the power of racist ideas and stereotypes: even though Kendi himself (a Black teenager) was their target, he continued to believe in them.*

Kendi's friends got in a fight with some other guys once, but it only lasted a few minutes—as soon as they heard sirens, they started running. They knew that the police were the real danger: Kendi knew that they might kill him and would get away with it if they did. The police continue to kill unarmed Black people far more often than unarmed white people. In retrospect, Kendi realizes that his unreasonable fear of Black people stopped him from intervening, like when Smurf attacked an Indian kid for taking his seat.

Although Kendi only got into one fight in four years of high school, he still risked being seen as a vicious criminal or being killed by the police. Whereas a white teenager might get a second chance, Black teenagers tend to be automatically stereotyped and criminalized. In other words, white teenagers get to be seen as individuals, but Black teenagers are only seen through the lens of their race.

In 1993, with the Congressional Black Caucus's support, Congress dramatically increased funding for police and prisons, while lengthening prison sentences and expanding categories for crime. This was intended to target Black people. Specifically, a Princeton professor popularized the now-debunked idea of "super-predators": psychopathic, remorseless Black teenagers who were natural criminals. Of course, crime was rapidly declining, but Kendi believes that anti-crime laws are not about stopping crime—they are about managing white people's fears of non-white people.

The Congressional Black Caucus's support for these racist policies is a reminder that actual effects matter more than intentions when it comes to racism. It's also a reminder that Black people can also participate in anti-Black racism. The racist idea of the "super-predator" followed and justified the crime bill, sustaining the fears that the crime bill was designed to manage. Again, this racist idea was a given legitimacy because it was backed by scientists—even though there was no actual science behind it.

On the school bus, Kendi and his peers were too terrified to intervene. Many Americans—including armed police officers—are similarly afraid when they see Black people. Smurf attacked the Indian kid and ran off, and Kendi used to think that all Black people would be as violent as him. He therefore focused on staying out of trouble rather than doing what he knew was right. But Kendi believes that the idea of urban Black neighborhoods being overwhelmingly violent or dangerous is just a racist stereotype—Kendi's own childhood was mostly peaceful. He knew which blocks were dangerous, but it had nothing to do with the race of the people who lived there.

In retrospect, Kendi isn't denying that Smurf was a dangerous person—rather, he's saying that he was wrong to exaggerate this danger and associate it with all Black people. Similarly, many Americans assume that, because certain urban Black neighborhoods have higher crime rates, it is inherently dangerous to go there. But this is a leap in reasoning based on a misunderstanding of how much crime actually happens and whom it targets. Kendi points out that media narratives tend to highlight the most extreme examples of this violence, which gives many Americans a one-sided picture of such neighborhoods and leads them to immediately associate them with violence.

In fact, reliable federal statistics show that young white and Black men commit crime at the same rate in the United States if those men are employed. Unemployment accounts for the entire variation in crime. Kendi doesn't believe that Segregationist calls for expanded policing and incarceration will improve the situation, nor will assimilationist "tough love" policies that seek to "civilize" people whom they consider inferior. Antiracists fight the true cause of higher crime rates in certain Black urban areas: a lack of accessible, dignified, well-paying jobs for young people. Antiracists do not deny that individuals like Smurf are dangerous, but they refuse to fear entire racial groups.

Kendi explains that, although it's true that many urban Black neighborhoods are more violent than suburban white neighborhoods, there is a racist explanation and an antiracist explanation for this data. The racist explanation is that the neighborhoods have more crime because their residents are Black, and the antiracist explanation is that there is more crime because these neighborhoods have higher unemployment. Kendi implies that the antiracist explanation is correct not simply because it is more ethical to blame people over policy, but also because it is empirically proven.

CHAPTER 7: CULTURE

A cultural racist believes in a cultural hierarchy of different racial groups, which they hold to some standard of superior or supreme culture. A cultural antiracist rejects the idea that one culture can be better than another.

Just like antiracism is about fighting for equity and not about pretending that there's no such thing as race, cultural antiracism is about learning to overcome one's own cultural biases and respecting all other cultures equally. However, it doesn't entail asking people to assimilate into a single culture or pretending that cultural differences don't exist.

In high school, Kendi only cared about one thing: basketball. His teachers viewed him as threatening, and he barely tried in school. He spent his weekends hanging out with friends in his neighborhood's main shopping street. They spoke in Ebonics—the African American dialect that is often considered an inferior and incorrect kind of English. Kendi disagrees with this assessment. He points out that in every region where Africans were enslaved, those African populations developed their own dialects—and racist people in positions of power always labeled them as inferior. For centuries, white people have demanded that Black people abandon their "broken" languages and learn the "standard" white dialect. But Kendi believes that there is no reason that "standard" dialects are superior to "broken" ones, besides cultural racism.

In many ways, Kendi's high school experiences fit stereotypes about Black teenagers. This is because American society associates many elements of Black urban culture—like the social importance of basketball and the Ebonics dialect—with negative moral judgments about Black people. So while readers might think there's something wrong with Kendi for fitting this stereotype, his point is actually to show how racist this stereotype really is. There's nothing wrong with identifying common characteristics of Black culture, but it's racist and illogical to associate these characteristics with inferiority, criminality, or a lack of intelligence. His point is that there is nothing inherently good or bad about any group's culture.

Biological racism became taboo after the Holocaust, but cultural racism remains alive and well. White Americans tend to look at African American culture as a "distorted or pathological" version of their own superior culture. In other words, they measure culture against a standard, which creates a hierarchy of cultures. Antiracists reject such standards, but segregationists and assimilationists uphold them. Segregationists think that other cultures can never match up to their own, while assimilationists try to force other groups to resemble the dominant culture.

Biological racism might be the most blatant and openly reviled form of racism, but cultural racism is the most common today, so it's arguably the most important to combat. When most Americans think of American culture, they probably think of white protestant culture. But this culture is only dominant and defined as truly "American" because it has had disproportionate power throughout history. Thus, even non-white Americans tend to implicitly measure the cultural beliefs and practices of nonwhite Americans through the racist idea that white culture is the gold standard.

In Kendi's childhood, Black culture wasn't imitating mainstream culture—it was precisely the other way around. For Kendi and his friends, this culture was mostly about fashion. And yet assimilationist writers still argue that Black Americans will solve racial inequities by giving up their "uncivilized" culture. Of course, for Kendi, "civilization" always meant school, while African American culture was his pride and joy. He was especially proud of how his ancestors repurposed European culture (like Christianity and the English language) to fit their needs. In fact, Kendi sees many African characteristics still alive in today's African American culture, which he appreciates on its own terms. So when he and his friends listened to hip-hop on the weekends, they heard poetry—even while the adults around him heard a threat to their personal and cultural development.

Ironically, many racists both demand that African American people give up their fashion, dialect, and music while also celebrating these things in popular culture. While many white people consider it cool and fashionable to imitate Black culture, they view Black people who actually participate in that culture as inferior, dangerous, and unintelligent. These imitators aren't appreciating Black culture on its own terms—they're viewing it through the lens of white culture. In contrast, Kendi's vision of African American culture shows how it's possible for people of all races to appreciate African American culture on its own terms. This is the key difference between appropriating and celebrating other cultures.

When Kendi moved to Virginia and transferred to Stonewall Jackson High School in 10th grade, he was frightened of Southern racism. He had no friends and thought that basketball offered his only hope of making any, so he broke down and cried to his father when he didn't make the JV team. Kendi admits that he looked down on rural Southern African American people, whose culture he viewed as somehow inferior to the urban, Northern Black culture he grew up with. He thought that New York superior to Virginia in every way—but now, years later, he sees that this arrogance was probably exactly why he couldn't make any friends.

Again, Kendi shows that in the past, he was guilty of the kind of racism he's describing now. This is a reminder that people who express racist beliefs and support racist policies are capable of change—in fact, it's far better to educate and persuade them than to shun them. Kendi's cultural racism came from his inability to understand the values and norms that people lived by in Virginia. Indeed, his difficulty adapting to life in the South shows how difficult it can be to learn to see other cultures as equal. This helps explain why so many Americans remain stubbornly prejudiced against the cultures of minority groups—but it also underlines the importance of fighting for change.

Cultural racism is, by definition, identifying a certain racial group as having a certain culture, then defining that culture as inferior. Even though Kendi did not look down on Black culture in general, he did look down on Black *Southern* culture, which is just as wrong as white New Yorkers looking down on Black New Yorkers, or 18th-century Europeans judging the rest of the world by their own cultural standards. Cultural antiracism simply means cultural relativism: we can see the differences among different cultures without thinking that these differences make any culture better or worse than any other. After a few months in Virginia, Kendi started to figure this out and learn to appreciate the local culture.

Although Kendi emphasizes that antiracists must respect different cultures rather than looking down on them, he also points out that there are no fixed boundaries between cultures. Black culture is a diverse category that includes the different cultures of African Americans, Black immigrants, and different places all around the country. Every time we judge another culture, we are really just expressing an idea from our own culture. In other words, all value judgments about cultures are themselves cultural *judgments. Thus, such judgments are circular and illogical: it's only possible to call another culture inferior if one already assumes that one's own culture is the gold standard.*

CHAPTER 8: BEHAVIOR

Kendi defines a behavioral racist as someone who conflates the behavior of individuals with that of entire racial groups. A behavioral antiracist understands that "racial group behavior" is a totally fictional concept.

Behavioral racism is about individual actions and traits, while cultural racism is about shared traditions, values, and norms. However, much behavioral racism comes from in a confusion between culture and behavior: racists wrongly assume that individuals' racial and cultural identities cause them to behave in certain ways.

Kendi did not try hard in high school, and the adults in his life pointed it out. This is similar to how politicians at the time told Black people they were wasting the opportunities granted to them by the Civil Rights Movement by, for instance, selling drugs, relying on welfare, and having too many children. These calls for individual responsibility tend to specifically target Black people—everybody criticized Kendi for not studying, but nobody cared when his white friends slacked off.

Although Kendi didn't sell drugs, rely on welfare, or father children in high school, his lackluster academic performance was still a problem in the eyes of adults, because it fit in with this broader racist stereotype. In other words, as a young Black man, Kendi was asked to act in certain ways in order to help others overcome their own racism. This burden is actually part of racism, because it's an expectation that falls to Black people but not white people, who usually get seen as individuals—not representatives of a race.

Kendi explains that racism itself was one factor that dissuaded him from trying in school. He certainly *could* have overcome it—but it's not reasonable to hold Black people to this extraordinary standard, when white people get second chances to make up for their mistakes. Kendi was a bad student, but it would be behavioral racism to call him "a bad *Black* student," which implies that his poor performance represents Black people as a whole. "Racial-group behavior" is an imaginary thing because no individual's behavior reflects their entire racial group.

Kendi points out that there's a significant difference between succeeding despite racism, which is often hailed as antiracist progress, and eliminating racism to begin with, which is real antiracist progress. The idea that the achievements of Black politicians, business leaders, or writers mean that racism no longer exists is also a form of behavioral racism. This is because it sets up different behavioral standards for different racial groups and uses a few individuals' behavior to distract from the overall inequities and trends experienced that a group experiences.

White progressives largely managed to overcome their biological, ethnic, bodily, and cultural racism by the 1990s, but many still believe in behavioral racism. Like the conservative voters they ostensibly oppose, some white progressives believe that "Black people are ruder, lazier, stupider, and crueler than White people." But there's no evidence for this, just like there's no "Black gene." There *are* cultural differences among racial groups, but culture is not the same as behavior. Culture is about shared traditions, whereas behavior is about individual traits that all human beings can potentially have (like intelligence or laziness).

Behavioral racism is based on generalizations that connect individual behaviors to a whole group's overall outcomes. Some Black people are rude, lazy, stupid, or cruel—and so are some white people. Characteristics like this are not tied to race. In reality, connecting behavior to race is just a way to shift attention away from policies and try to blame people for inequities.

Behavioral racism has a long history. In the 19th century, proslavery writers argued that freedom made Black people behave badly, while abolitionist thinkers (like today's assimilationists) believed that oppression made Black people immoral and lazy. Racist policy has always been traumatic for some African American individuals, but this does not mean that "Blacks are a traumatized people" as a whole.

Kendi again clearly distinguishes between talking about certain individuals' behavior and using this behavior to generalize about an entire group of people, based on an entirely unrelated characteristic like race.

Growing up, Black adults saw Kendi's failures as failures for the whole race. His mom and dad pushed him to try harder in school, but when he struggled in International Baccalaureate (IB) classes, he started seeing himself as "an imposter." He blamed this failure on being Black.

When Kendi accepted the behaviorally racist ideas that his parents and community fed him, he learned to see both his successes and his failures as simply the products of his race. He lost track of his own individual accomplishments and responsibilities in the process.

Behavioral racists often note that Black students consistently score the lowest on standardized tests, which they believe suggests that Black students are less intelligent. But as Kendi realized while taking a GRE prep class in college, these test scores have very little to do with intelligence. Prep class only taught him to game the exam—just like lifting a lot of weight in the gym requires knowing the right form, scoring high on standardized requires learning certain techniques for taking them. Since they are just numbers, test scores often look like objective measures of intelligence. But in reality, the tests are the problem, not the students who take them.

Common debates about racial differences in standardized testing tend to assume that the tests measure people's innate intelligence rather than a specific set of skills and knowledge that different groups have varied access to because of resource disparities. Finding a biological link between race and intelligence is impossible because neither race nor intelligence are objective scientific concepts.

The history of standardized taking makes this all the more clear. In the early 20th century, eugenicist scientists developed IQ tests in the hopes of demonstrating that different racial groups had different levels of intelligence. A few years later, they created the SAT for the same reason. Although assimilationists have long blamed environmental factors for Black people's poor performance on these tests, the eugenicist argument never disappeared. Most notably, Charles Murray and Richard Herrnstein's widely discredited book *The Bell Curve* argued that genes help explain the achievement gap. Over time, policymakers have emphasized these tests more and more, based on the racist idea that they measure innate intellectual ability. But in reality, Black children aren't less intellectually capable than white children. Rather, the testing gap shows that they have different kinds of intelligence adapted to their differing circumstances and, more importantly, that they attend schools with far fewer resources as compared to white students.

Intelligence tests are a circular process: to justify their racism, scientists created a biased tool that leads to biased results. When Kendi says that Black children have different kinds of intelligence, he isn't saying that they are somehow innately different from white children. Rather, he's saying that people who score lower on standardized tests aren't less intelligent—it's just that their intelligence doesn't show up on standardized tests, which only measure specific kinds of cognitive abilities.

In high school, Kendi flirted with a girl named Angela, who convinced him to sign up for the MLK oratorical contest. His speech was full of classic behavioral racist ideas. But now, he understands that antiracism requires that we "deracialize behavior" and treat it as a purely individual phenomenon. Angela loved his speech and backed him up when he accidentally slept through the contest—she convinced the judges to give him another shot, and he won. Kendi felt proud of his academic achievements for the first time and started looking forward to attending Florida A&M University (FAMU), the country's largest HBCU (historically Black college or university).

Returning to the speech he discussed in the book's introduction, Kendi can now clearly identify the reason his message was racist: he repeated the common idea that Black people are somehow predisposed to bad behavior, and that this behavior leads to poverty and violence. It's illogical to say that a racial group behaves in certain ways because of race, *and it's much harder for people to never make mistakes than it is for society to change in order to forgive some of those mistakes. The fact that Kendi slept through his timeslot and still won the contest is even clearer proof that people's good or bad behavior does not always correlate with their outcomes in life. It also attests to the value of second chances, something that Kendi advocates is necessary for antiracist activist to grant others.*

CHAPTER 9: COLOR

Colorism is a set of policies and supporting ideas that sustain inequities between light-skinned and dark-skinned people, while color antiracism supports equity between them.

Although colorism exists within various racial groups, Kendi focuses this chapter on colorism in the Black community. Like race itself, lightness and darkness are not absolute or biological categories. Rather, they're socially constructed by those in positions of power.


Kendi remembers attending Florida A&M's homecoming football game and watching its world-famous marching band perform. His roommate Clarence was intelligent and driven, and he also had light skin and hazel eyes. Meanwhile, Kendi wore light-colored contact lenses but had his hair in cornrows. He didn't realize it, but his colored contacts were a way to look less Black and closer to the colorist "post-racial beauty ideal" of lightness, which has been called "white beauty repackaged with dark hair."

Kendi's style demonstrates that he continued to suffer from a dueling consciousness in college. He wanted to be light-skinned because it was considered cool and desirable, but also wanted to be dark-skinned and dismantle the hierarchy that labeled lightness as more desirable. The first is assimilationist, while the second is antiracist. The light-skinned "post-racial beauty ideal" shows how racist and antiracist progress often go hand-in-hand: while actually being *white is no longer part of the American beauty standard,* looking *white still is.*

Even if light-skinned and dark-skinned people are all Black, these are distinct racialized subgroups. It's not just about skin color: darkness also encompasses kinkier hair textures and larger facial features. Although inequity across color lines (or colorism) is often forgotten, antiracists must recognize and address it. There are clear disparities between light and dark-skinned Black people in health, education, and employment. Light-skinned and dark-skinned immigrants and Latinx Americans suffer similar inequities. Dark-skinned Black youth even get punished more harshly in school and the justice system than light-skinned people do.

Just as the inequities between white and Black people suggest that racist policies are at work, the inequities between light-skinned and dark-skinned Black people suggest that racist policies specifically target dark-skinned people to a greater extent than light-skinned people. These inequities are also a reminder that racism is also alive and well within *communities of color.*

At FAMU, Kendi's peers generally preferred dating light-skinned women with straight hair. So did he: his first girlfriend was light-skinned, and her dark-skinned roommate got no attention from men. Over time, this colorism bothered Kendi so much that he broke up with his girlfriend, started only dating dark-skinned women, and became prejudiced against anyone who did not share his preference. Like many dark-skinned people, he flipped the hierarchy around: dark-skinned people often say that light-skinned people aren't "Black enough." But just like race, lightness and darkness have no biological basis. Real antiracism isn't about flipping beauty standards around, but rather about diversifying them, like our ideas of culture and intelligence. Antiracists appreciate *everyone's* natural beauty.

Kendi made the common mistake of preserving the central idea of racism (that one group is superior to another), simply flipping it to put the subordinate group at the top and the dominant group at the bottom. Now, years later, he sees that people should respond to hierarchies by rejecting the principle of hierarchy altogether, not just moving different groups up and down the latter. His friends' refusal to date dark-skinned women is an excellent small-scale example of an informal racist policy, which produces inequities even though it is not a formal law.

Colorism has a long history: enslaved light-skinned people were generally assigned to less physically demanding roles on American plantations, and racist ideas developed to justify this. Some considered light-skinned people superior, and deserving of more refined work, because they were closer to whiteness. Others considered dark people purer and therefore stronger, which meant that they were better-suited for manual labor. Similarly, the "tragic mulatto" trope implied that light-skinned people were originally white but poisoned by a some Black blood in their family line.

Like all the other dimensions of racism that Kendi explores in this book, colorism was originally a tactic for dividing and controlling groups of people. The colorist ideas of the past—that light-skinned people are somehow blessed with whiteness, while dark-skinned people are "pure"—are the foundation for the colorist ideas that Kendi and his friends believed in college. Modern-day colorist ideas descend directly from those of the past.

After emancipation, light-skinned people took after white segregationists and invented absurd laws to exclude dark-skinned people from their clubs and political organizations. W.E.B. Du Bois initially denied that there was a color line within the Black race, until he noticed the NAACP ignoring the problems faced by dark-skinned people and heard its light-skinned chairman call dark-skinned people inferior. He also saw Black people straightening their hair and lightening their skin. It took until the Black Power movement for people (like Kendi's father) to start taking pride in darkness. Of course, some overdid it and inverted the color hierarchy instead of fighting it. Still, lightness is privileged over darkness today: around the world, skin-bleaching is incredibly popular among non-white people.

Light-skinned segregationists turned the same policies that oppressed them against dark-skinned people. In fact, this follows the same principle as Kendi and the Black Power activists who simply inverted the colorist hierarchy by declaring dark-skinned people more beautiful than light-skinned people. In both these cases, instead of choosing to fight inequities, groups decided that they'd rather create different inequities for their own benefit. Similar colorist inequities around the world suggest that white supremacy has helped make lightness desirable almost everywhere.


Kendi returns to the marching band's performance during the FAMU football game. It absolutely dazzled him, and the whole crowd went wild. Later, Kendi had to tell Clarence his "latest epiphany."

Kendi's astonishment at the marching band and his" latest epiphany" suggest that college was an important period of personal transformation for him. This underlines his belief that everyone is capable of change and deserves the opportunity to do so.

CHAPTER 10: WHITE

Kendi defines anti-white racism as thinking there is something "biologically, culturally, or behaviorally inferior" about people with European ancestry. It can also entail the belief that all white people are complicit in racist power structures.

Notably, Kendi limits his definition of anti-white racism to racist ideas, even though he thinks of racism as a marriage of policies and ideas that support them. This is because white people are the dominant racial group in virtually every society where they are present, and therefore they generally benefit from most racial inequities that exist. In other words, there certainly are anti-white racist ideas, but there are few anti-white racist policies significant enough to produce meaningful inequities on a societal scale.

In college, after watching the FAMU marching band perform, Kendi told his ever-skeptical roommate Clarence that he "figured white people out." He was also trying to figure out other Black people, since FAMU was a unique environment full of Black excellence. Kendi remembers watching the presidential election results in 2000, which hinged on a few hundred votes in Florida, their state. Kendi blamed Black people from not voting enough, without understanding that the state government purged thousands of people from the voter rolls, invalidated 200,000 ballots, and blocked recounts—all strategies that targeted Black voters. Still, while FAMU's student government protested the results, students like Kendi publicly shamed their nonvoting peers.

Kendi's desire to "figure out" different groups of people reflects both his dedication to reaching the truth about racism and his misguided assumption that there is a singular, definable secret that explains all the differences between racial groups. Meanwhile, the 2000 election shows how racist policies hurt everyone, *not just Black people. Out of a desire to prevent certain people from voting, the federal government undermined the nation's faith in the entire electoral process.*


After the election, Kendi decided that all white people were evil. He started reading the work of Nation of Islam (NOI) leader Elijah Muhammad, who argued that an evil Black scientist created white people through eugenics thousands of years ago, before Moses civilized the white "devil race" and they managed to conquer Europe. Kendi notes that this story is exactly like the stories white racists tell about Black people: that a certain race was savage until a superior race civilized them through colonization and slavery. It also supports that racist notion that today, there are inferior groups who are animalistic criminals (in "developed" countries) or who are violent, uncivilized, and incapable of self-government (in "developing" countries).

Although Elijah Muhammad's ideas seem outlandish and improbable, their anti-Black counterparts are essentially common-sense beliefs in the United States. The two stories are virtually identical—which is to say that neither makes logical sense. But, whether racists openly admit it or not, many continue to think of Black people (and other non-white people around the world) as somehow culturally or behaviorally inferior. This perspective overlooks the fact that Europeans have politically and economically dominated the world for the last five centuries.

Kendi initially loved the NOI's story because it neatly explained racism and helped him make sense of the 2000 election. Civil rights activist Malcolm X also fell for the NOI's story while in prison and then eventually brought the organization to national fame. But later, upon traveling to Mecca and seeing Muslims of all races praying together, Malcolm X quit the NOI and disavowed Elijah Muhammad's philosophy. He also took the remarkable step of recognizing that anti-white racism is real.

The Nation of Islam's story is attractive because it has a clear hero and villain, and it explains hundreds of years of complex history by simply proclaiming that white people have something inherently evil in their souls. Malcolm X abandoned this biological racism when he saw that biology could not separate him from other devout Muslims of all races—including many white people.

Antiracist people recognize that white people have killed, impoverished, and enslaved many millions of people around the world over the last several centuries. But they do not blame whiteness, whether biologically, culturally, or behaviorally. Hating white racism is antiracist, but hating white people is anti-white racist. Not all white people are racist, and racist power hurts most white people, just like it hurts people of color. So although all white people gain something from racist policy (which disadvantages other groups more than them), the vast majority of white people have *more* to gain by fighting for a just, equitable, antiracist world. This requires redistributing resources from racist power to the masses. Additionally, racist ideas often indirectly hurt white people too. For instance, many white people blame themselves for being poor, even though this "personal failure" idea began as a racist justification for eliminating social assistance for Black people.

Kendi admits that antiracists easily fall into the trap of blaming all white people for racism. He emphasizes that it's crucial to hate the deed, not the doer—and certainly not the doer's racial group. This is why Kendi takes issue with the notions that white people are inherently racist, can never be antiracist, or always benefit from perpetuating racist power rather than defeating it.

Some white people have long claimed that anti-discrimination civil rights laws are anti-white, as they view policy that does not automatically prioritize white interests as racist against them. Kendi points out that these people are defending the interests of racist power, even though it doesn't benefit them. Similarly, many people of color adopt genuine anti-white racism, which also benefits racist power because it steers them away from focusing on the real problem: racist policies. As a result, Black people hurt themselves when they become anti-white, and white people hurt themselves when they become anti-Black. For instance, white supremacists tend to oppose programs like affirmative action, which primarily benefits white women, and Obamacare, even though 43 percent of its beneficiaries were white.

Curiously, both racist white people who protest anti-discrimination laws and people of color who antagonize white people are actually fighting against their own interests. Although racist ideas are originally created by racist policymakers to protect their self-interest, these ideas take on a life of their own once they enter the public sphere. Both anti-Black and anti-white ideas are effective tools for dividing and conquering Americans who could otherwise stand up to racist power. Racist policies might appear to be in working- and middle-class white people's self-interest—but in reality, they're not. In fact, many such white people trade better working and living conditions (which they'd get from antiracist policies) for a mere emotional sense of racial superiority (which they get from racist policies).

In college, Kendi started hating white people just like many Americans started hating Muslims after 9/11. He read discredited anthropological theories that claimed Europeans are more warlike and ruthless because of Europe's climate and bogus psychiatry books suggesting that white people use violence to compensate for an unconscious fear of demographic decline. Kendi also had an epiphany of his own that he shared with Clarence: white people are "aliens." Clarence couldn't believe that he was serious and pointed out that Black and white people can reproduce, which means that they are obviously all human beings. Kendi started to realize that his sources might not be so reliable. But he still managed to get himself in trouble a few years later, when he published an embarrassing op-ed full of bogus theories about white people in a local newspaper.

Kendi's anti-white racism illustrates how ideas follow rather than drive policy: he based his worldview on discredited pseudoscience that wouldn't hold up in his college classes. His conspiracy theory about white people being aliens further illustrates how people often willfully abandon logic in order to confirm their preconceived notions about race. As with many racists, a brief reality check was all Kendis needed to look for other, more reliable historical explanations for racism.

CHAPTER 11: BLACK

The powerless defense is the racist idea that Black people can't be racist because they don't hold any power in society.

The powerless defense works hand-in-hand with the idea that there is no such thing as anti-white racism: both depend on the assumption that racism is something that only white people do to only people of color, when the reality is far more complex.

As a young adult, Kendi visited the *Tallahassee Democrat* newspaper office to defend his incendiary article. The editor emphasized that he thought he was better than other Black people—or, as he put it, "them niggers." Kendi recalls a famous comedy set in which Chris Rock said, "I love Black people, but I hate niggers." He explains that Black people often treat other Black people's bad behavior as a sign that they belong to an inferior sub-group of Black people. This is exactly like what behavioral racists do when they view an individual Black person's bad behavior as reflective of their Blackness. In fact, most Black Americans blamed causes besides racism for racial inequity in 2003 and 2013 (but no longer in 2017). Lots of Black people—including the newspaper editor—are themselves anti-Black racists.

The newspaper editor's words, as well as Chris Rock's comedy set, recall Kendi's speech in his high school oratorial contest: they all repeat offensive slurs and racist stereotypes about Black people while simultaneously claiming to be the exception. In this way, they both deny and advance behavioral racism. Just like colorism and ethnic racism, this is an example of how racism occurs between different subgroups of Black people. This is enough to show that the powerless defense is too simplistic: it's clearly possible for Black people to support racist policies and express racist ideas targeted at other Black people.

Kendi used to believe in the "powerless defense," the idea that only white people can be racist because only white people have power. This is actually a racist idea that lets powerful people of color avoid taking antiracist action and diminishes the power that lack people do have (while exaggerating white people's power). In reality, everyone has *some* power, and some Black people have a lot of it—there are Black congresspeople, judges, police officers, university professors, billionaires, CEOs, and presidents. White people have *most* of the power, but not all of it.

The powerless defense is based on the assumption that race is the only thing that determines someone's power. In reality, it's one among many factors, and many powerful people of color actually use their influence to perpetuate racism rather than undermine it. As a result, the powerless defense ends up defending and perpetuating racism, while preventing people of color from seeing their power to drive social change.

The powerless defense makes it impossible to call out Black racists, like Ken Blackwell, the Ohio official who helped suppress Black votes for the Bush and Trump campaigns. The powerless defense also claims that Black people are "not racist," which is impossible—according to Kendi's definition of racism, they're either racist or antiracist.

Kendi's definitions of racism and antiracism can help people overcome the powerless defense, because they depend on the effects of an individual's words and actions—not on that individual's race.

Black anti-Black racism has a long history, starting with the enslaved writer Leo Africanus, who wrote about the supposed savagery and stupidity of African people. The earliest known slave memoir celebrated slavery and Christianity, and Denmark Vesey's famous 1822 slave revolt was crushed because a slave decided to defend white racism and report on Vesey's plans. Light-skinned writers like William Hannibal Thomas also advanced racist ideas about darker-skinned Black people. In the 20th and 21st centuries, many of the police officers responsible for the worst crimes against Black people have themselves been Black. Similarly, Black politicians concerned about "Black on Black crime" specifically sought to imprison Black criminals to suggest that they were addressing the problem. And when Ronald Reagan directed funds away from social programs that benefited Black Americans, he hired Black officials to oversee and publicly defend the process.

Although it may seem strange that enslaved Black people would sell each other out in the 18th and 19th centuries, they did so for the same reasons as Europeans who invented the first racist ideas: for self-interest. Racist power structures reward them for turning against other Black people, and through their collaboration, racist policies get an air of legitimacy: because certain Black officials are supporting a policy or idea, many people assume that the Black community as a whole defends them. This assumption is behaviorally racist, but so is much of the population, so it tends to dispel criticism of racist power. Powerful Black people's contributions to racism are another good reason to separate the opposition between racism and antiracism from the distinction between white people and people of color.

Kendi returns to his conversation with the newspaper editor, who shuts down his column. As the antiracist voice in Kendi's dueling consciousness starts winning out over the assimilationist one, he adds a major in African American studies. He learns that history was not a conflict between white and Black people but "between racists and antiracists."

Through missteps and disagreements, Kendi gradually refines his ideas about race and learns to shed his assimilationist assumptions. Specifically, by learning to see history as a conflict "between racists and antiracists"—or between racist progress and antiracist progress—he realizes that people's side in the battle is not fixed. In other words, white people can fight for antiracism and Black people for racism—and, most importantly, everyone is capable of transforming or switching sides.

CHAPTER 12: CLASS

Kendi defines a class racist as someone who racializes certain socioeconomic groups or supports racial capitalist policies. Meanwhile, an antiracist anti-capitalist opposes racial capitalism.

So far, Kendi has presented the main categories of racial ideas and then focused on the way people of color promote racism through colorism, anti-white ideas, and the powerless defense. Now, he starts to look at how racism intersects with other structures of social hierarchy, starting with socioeconomic class.

When Kendi started graduate school, he moved to a lively and diverse but dangerous "ghetto" neighborhood in Philadelphia. Black migrants from the South moved there during the 20th century, before the white population left for government-subsidized suburbs where Black people legally couldn't live. Like all American ghettoes, it was created by government policy. But now, the word "ghetto" is associated with poor Black people and antisocial behavior.

Like urban neighborhoods all around the United States, Kendi's neighborhood in Philadelphia was poor and predominantly Black because the government implemented specific segregation policies. Americans usually associate segregation with the South before the Civil Rights Movement—but American cities remain heavily segregated because of past formal housing discrimination and present informal discrimination.

"Black poor" is what Kendi calls a race-class, defined by both racialization (Black) and economic class (poor). Class racism combines elitist ideas about poor people with racist ideas about certain groups, and these ideas then support elitist and racist policies. Antiracists respond to class racist concepts like "white trash" and "ghetto Blacks" by insisting that these groups are equal to all others. Their troubles stem from policy, not personal or cultural inferiority, as elite classes might suggest.

The concept of race-class describes how racism and capitalism work together to produce unique forms of inequity for people who are in both subordinate racial groups and subordinate class groups. It largely functions through the same process as racism: policies create inequities, and ideas emerge to justify them.

In the 1950s, anthropologist Oscar Lewis blamed marginalization on a "culture of poverty," an idea that's still popular today. Other scholars, like Kenneth Clark, saw that oppressive policies actually created intergenerational poverty. Some policymakers interpreted this argument as meaning that welfare was oppressive and needed to be withdrawn. Like many elite Black people, Clark indirectly supported this by viewing poor Black people's culture as degraded and inferior due to oppression. Barack Obama frequently echoes this idea. Ultimately, like racist white people, these Black elites attack poor Black people in order to feel a sense of superiority.

Although Clark saw that government policies intentionally impoverished Black communities, his assumption that this made these communities inferior is a form of cultural and class racism. This shows that races are not homogeneous groups: rather, there are many different divisions and sub-groups within them. Inequities among these sub-groups underline the importance of addressing racism through an intersectional lens, by paying attention to the diverse experiences and needs of all the people whom racism disadvantages.

In Philadelphia, Kendi realized that the ghetto was formed through racial capitalism, the alliance between racism and capitalism. Martin Luther King Jr. pointed this out in 1967, but few people listened. Capitalism and racism were born together, through the transatlantic slave trade and European colonization. These policies were designed to turn a profit and were justified through racism. They ultimately led to war and genocide.

The concept of racial capitalism comes from the recognition that racism and capitalism are interdependent systems: they came into existence together. During the era of colonization in early modernity, racism maintained the hierarchical social order necessary for capitalism to function—and it arguably continues to do so today.

Now, stark racial inequities in poverty, unemployment, wages, and wealth show that racial capitalism continues as before. And these inequities are worsening: globally, the income gap between rich (mostly white) nations and poor (mostly non-white) nations has tripled in the last 50 years. In the United States, white people have much greater social mobility and wealth, even when controlling for income. This is, in part, because poor white people tend to live in otherwise middle-class neighborhoods, while poor Black people tend to live in segregated neighborhoods where *everyone* is poor and Black.

Kendi believes that industrialized Europe and North America are wealthy because most of the rest of the world is poor. Global economic power is largely in the hands of rich white people who act out of self-interest. Additionally, the difference between the poor Black neighborhoods and poor white neighborhoods shows how class takes on a fundamentally different meaning for members of different racial groups.

Kendi concludes that antiracists cannot address racial inequities without also being anti-capitalists, and anti-capitalists cannot address class inequities without being antiracists. For instance, many socialist groups have historically focused on white workers but wrongly excluded people of color, whose concerns they reduced to "identity politics." But Karl Marx clearly saw that capitalism and racism were like "conjoined twins," and W.E.B. Du Bois began formulating the idea of racial capitalism while reading Marx. The generation of antiracist anti-capitalist activists who immediately followed Du Bois faced persecution in the 1950s but rose up in the 1960s. This mindset became prominent again in the 2010s, after the Great Recession.

Because politics is about power, and elites have most of it, antiracist campaigns that focus on "identity politics" rather than economic justice for the working class end up becoming strongly biased toward elites. The policies they create—like diversity programs in governments, universities, and corporations—attempt to solve racism without rocking the boat about economic inequality. Since racism and capitalism are "conjoined twins," these programs will never produce meaningful change for the vast majority of people of color.

In today's political discourse, conservatives frequently reject certain policies as "anticapitalist." These include anti-poverty programs, labor union protections, and higher taxes on the rich. This suggests that they define capitalism as the freedom to exploit others, without restraint, for profit. In contrast, many liberals define capitalism as a belief in the power of well-regulated markets. Kendi agrees with these liberals' goals, but their definition of capitalism is historically inaccurate. Markets existed long before capitalism and have never been fair under it. Capitalism only began when Europeans started using power constructs like race to divide and conquer people around the globe. Western countries only built wealth *because* of slavery, colonialism, and the mass extraction of natural resources from colonized countries.

When liberals define capitalism as equitable and well-regulated markets, they're suggesting that such markets have existed in the past—but they haven't. Kendi argues that, in reality, capitalism has always been about the extraction of resources and the concentration of wealth and power. It is a free market for a small minority but an oppressive one for the majority of humanity. Truly free markets are antithetical to capitalism, which systematically produces inequality, not equality.

While Kendi's mom and dad were nervous about him moving to the poor Black neighborhood, Kendi considered urban poverty the most authentic form of Blackness. So his consciousness was dueling between "Black is Beautiful" and "Black is Misery." He was really acting in a racist way: he wanted the neighborhood to make him more Black. Genuine antiracism, however, requires seeing poor and elite Black culture as equals. Like many Black scholars, Kendi wrongly viewed elite Black culture as corrupt, inauthentic, and socially irresponsible. But it wasn't—for instance, the Black elite led the civil rights movement.

Just like his anti-white racism and his insistence on only dating dark-skinned women in college, Kendi's belief that poor Black culture is more authentic is really a way of flipping social hierarchies—not rejecting them altogether. Of course, it's important to find value in the groups that conventional racist hierarchies denigrate—by saying, for example, that "Black is Beautiful." But Kendi suggests that this should be a first step toward dissolving the hierarchy entirely and instead learning to view all groups as equal.

CHAPTER 13: SPACE

Space racism is the set of policies and supporting ideas that create inequities among different racialized spaces or eliminate protected spaces. Space antiracism is the set of policies and ideas that promotes racial equity in both integrated and protected spaces.

Kendi's argument about racism in different spaces, whether institutional or informal, relies on the observation that certain racial groups and their cultures dominate different places. The way a space is racialized depends not only on who is present in the space, but also on who holds power *in that space.*

Temple University's African American studies department, where Kendi did his PhD, is a Black space that centers Black people, ideas, histories, and cultures. In contrast, the university as a whole centers white people, ideas, histories, and cultures, which it considers "universal." This European-centered worldview is the default in society at large, including among many Black people. But at Temple, the visionary scholar Ama Mazama taught Kendi that there is no such thing as an objective worldview—rather, what seems to be objectivity is really just "collective subjectivity." This revolutionized Kendi's own worldview. When he asked what scholars should try to achieve instead of objectivity, Mazama's answer was to "tell the truth."

Kendi argues that the education offered at most American universities isn't "universal" because the curriculum offers a narrow perspective that only represents the experiences of Europeans—a small slice of humanity. While people might complain that African American studies is also insufficiently universal Kendi believes that universities need African American studies because the default curriculum not universal enough. Of course, he also questions whether it's possible to be "universal" or objective at all. Kendi's points out that objectivity and the truth are not the same thing: rather, objectivity gets in the way of seeing the truth. He believes that an objective view point is really just a subjective one that the majority agrees upon. When people claim to be objective, they are claiming to have the only *valid viewpoint. This means that they immediately write off any opposing ideas instead of logically considering them, which gets in the way of finding the truth.*


Temple University was a white space. People had to present identification to get in, because the administration wanted to keep out the poor Black people who lived nearby. This was based on the racist idea that poor Black neighborhoods are violent. Kendi points out that white neighborhoods are violent and dangerous, even though financial criminals (who are mostly white) steal 100 times as much money as robbers, and drunk drivers (also mostly white) kill far more people than homicide every year. Kendi isn't saying that white neighborhoods are more violent, but instead that people decide what counts as violence based on racist assumptions.

When Kendi argues that wealthy white neighborhoods are violent, he is not denying that there is plenty of violence in poor Black neighborhoods. Rather, he's saying that the way Americans define violence is specific to the crimes that are more common in poor and Black communities, while excluding the crimes that wealthy and white people commit. This is another example of how "objectivity" is really just a way of disguising a particular subjective view of the world as the only acceptable one. It's also another compelling reason to pay special attention to definitions, as this is often where racist assumptions lie.

When a certain group has power or an obvious population majority in a space, this space becomes "racialized." Space racism is term for how racist policies redistribute resources from non-white spaces toward white spaces. Space racist ideas establish "a racial hierarchy of space" to justify these inequities.

Like all forms of racism, space racism relies on policies that produce inequities and are supported by ideas. One way that space racism redistributes resources toward white spaces is by changing the power dynamics and racial composition of spaces in the first place. (For instance, through the gentrification of poor, predominantly non-white neighborhoods).

Most of Kendi's fellow PhD students were proud of their historically Black colleges and universities—except one, who also attended FAMU. She was angry that someone at the school messed up her transcript, and she blamed the whole institution for this mistake.

This student's animosity toward FAMU follows the same pattern as behavioral racism: she judges an entire group (or institution) based on the actions of a single individual. In any other context, her anecdotal evidence would set off red flags in a university setting. But behavioral racism is so common when it comes to race that even a PhD student in Black studies does not recognize it.


People commonly find similar justifications for denigrating historically Black institutions. Kendi's uncle argued that Black students should go to historically white schools in order to learn how to white spaces. But Kendi points out that this isn't a useful life skill for most Black Americans, who spend their whole lives in majority-Black neighborhoods, jobs, churches, and so on. Like many Americans, Kendi's uncle wrongly assumed that only white spaces counted as "the real world." But antiracists know that there are *multiple* real worlds.

Kendi's uncle's idea is assimilationist and space racist because he assumes that Black people are only successful if they work in majority-white spaces. In other words, Kendi's uncle is thinking just like Kendi did when he moved to Philadelphia: he assumes that wealth and success are inherently white, while poverty and failure are inherently Black.

Other critics insist that historically Black institutions provide an inferior education—but comparing Black and white spaces, or rich and poor spaces, is impossible without also accounting for inequities in their access to resources. Without looking at resources, comparisons are often biased. For instance, people complain that historically Black institutions have lower graduation rates overall, yet Black students at these institutions actually have *higher* graduation rates. These critics hold racialized spaces to a racist double standard, just like Kendi used to: in white spaces, he blamed individuals for their errors. But in Black spaces, he blamed the space itself, while conveniently forgetting resource disparities.

Kendi isn't saying that people should never compare Black and white spaces or institutions—rather, he's saying that comparisons should specifically look at how those spaces and institutions utilize the resources available to them. It's misleading to simply compare outputs (like graduation rates) without recognizing inputs (like funding or staffing).

In the United States, space racism began with debates about sending Black people back to Africa in the 1800s. Later, during the Civil War, Black leaders asked for a region of their own, so General Sherman destroyed much of Georgia and South Carolina, then promised emancipated people 40 acres and a mule (which few ever received). Assimilationists like editor Horace Greeley advocated integration as a way to improve Black people and fight white racism.

There's a big difference between white people trying to send Black people back to Africa and Black people asking for a region in which to live. The first is forcible segregation based on a dominant racial group's desire to separate themselves from a subordinate group and refuse to share resources with them. The second is a subordinate racial group's request for a protected space, so that they can shield themselves from racism.

Now, integrationist ideas are common, and people who hold them assume that creating separate racialized spaces means imposing segregation. This is wrong: protected all-Black spaces can create cultural solidarity and provide a refuge from racism. Integrationists are still responding to the idea of "separate but equal," which segregationists used to justify separate and *unequal* spaces. Although the civil rights movement focused on fighting "separate" rather than "equal" for political reasons, it's totally possible to create "separate but equal" spaces that aren't segregated. Enduring racial power imbalances just make this very difficult in practice.

Kendi is not defending the segregationist version of separate but equal, because 20th-century segregationists separated spaces by force and ensured that they weren't actually equal. Rather, he is arguing that all racial groups should receive an equitable amount of public resources and have specific spaces that center their own histories, cultures, and experiences.

The American solution to school segregation was to bus Black students to white schools. This reinforced racism by suggesting that white spaces are superior, and that Black people have to enter them to be successful. This is exactly what Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. feared. Today, 80 percent of public school teachers are white, but most of their students are not. White teachers have lower expectations of their non-white students, which creates a self-fulfilling prophecy: poor Black students perform much worse in school if they don't have any Black teachers.

Again, Kendi believes that Martin Luther King Jr.'s legacy has been distorted. Many assume that his vision has been achieved, when in reality, the United States remains highly unequal. Like most antiracist activists, King's fundamental goal was equality, *not integration. The fact that students perform better with teachers of their same race reflects the importance of creating protected spaces: by insulating people from the effects of racism, protected spaces help them perform to their fullest potential.*

With school desegregation, the Supreme Court banned segregated white spaces that hoarded resources while allowing integrated white spaces that hoarded resources. Now, politicians frequently suggest that Black students go to integrated, white-dominated schools in order to improve. Integration did improved outcomes for Black students, but only because it gave these students the same resources and funding as their white peers. In other words, the solution is an equitable distribution of resources, not integration for integration's sake.

The Supreme Court's decision shows how the focus on integration versus segregation is actually a racist idea: it centers the conversation around diversity, not power. In other words, it is based on the assumption that a space is better or worse depending on the race of the people who are present in it. In reality, improving schools for students of color is mainly about where and how the government apportions funding for schools.

In fact, Kendi points out that a perfectly integrated space representative of the American population would still be majority-white. If integrationists want every space to be integrated this way, they would make every space a white space. In contrast, antiracists think everyone should have "open and equal access" to different spaces, but that all groups should have spaces that prioritize them. Most importantly, resources must be distributed equitably among these spaces.

Kendi again emphasizes that antiracism's goal isn't diversity but rather an equitable distribution of power and resources. Integration, diversity, and "color-blind" policies are often assimilationism in disguise—they assume that people of color need to imitate white people and join white spaces in order to improve. Meanwhile, segregationism forces subordinate groups out of dominant spaces in order to preserve the dominant group's advantages, creating a system of separate and unequal spaces. In contrast, antiracism asks for protected and equitable spaces. Such spaces help different cultures coexist and learn from one another, without pressuring any of them to change.

CHAPTER 14: GENDER

Gender racism is the policies and supporting ideas that create inequity among people of different race-genders (groups defined by both race and gender, like Black women). Gender antiracism, on the other hand, leads to equity among race-genders.

Talking about racism in a vacuum—without mentioning the other forces that affect people's lives, like sexism, classism, and homophobia—would mean ignoring the experiences and needs of most people of color. This is why Kendi dedicates this chapter to talking about how racism specifically affects people of different genders.

Kendi remembers Kaila and Yaba, the most brilliant, courageous, and respected students in his doctoral program. When he started his PhD, Kendi was sexist and homophobic. He didn't learn it from his parents, but rather because it was the cultural norm.

Just like racism, Kendi learned sexism and homophobia from society's dominant views, so he had to take active steps to unlearn them if he wanted to help create a more equitable world. Now, he has learned to express his respect for Kaila and Yaba without letting sexist assumptions get in his way.

In the 1960s, worried about "broken" Black families headed by single mothers, Black community leaders tried to make Black fathers dominant in their families. In the process, they disempowered and controlled Black women—all the while declaring that Black men, not Black women, were the real victims of racism. Similarly, many of the era's Black political movements were explicitly patriarchal—Kendi's father never joined the Black Panthers or the Nation of Islam because he saw them mistreat women. But he and Kendi's mom still rallied against Black single motherhood, without questioning their assumptions about what makes a family function. To explain the growing percentage of babies born to Black single parents, most Americans blamed welfare, poverty, and moral degradation. But in reality, this statistic just reflected the fact that *married* Black women were having fewer children than before.

Racist narratives about Black mothers, as well as the male-centered agendas of Black nationalist movements, show that Black women experience racism in a distinct way that can't be separated from their experiences of sexism. It's too simplistic to say that they simply face racism (like Black men) and sexism (like white women). Rather, these two forces constantly work together. In fact, Black liberation movements put themselves at a huge disadvantage by not taking deliberate steps to include women, as this alienates half of their possible supporters. These movements' racist-sexist ideas were attempts to blame apparent inequities on people themselves.

Still, Kendi's parents were feminists. At their wedding rehearsal, his mother refused to repeat the vow, "wives [should] obey your husbands," and his father proposed the more equal vow that they would "submit one to another." His mom attended Black feminist discussion groups, which were growing rapidly in this era. Activists like Audre Lorde, Angela Davis, and the women of the Combahee River Collective drew attention to Black women's experiences.

Black feminist movements like the one Kendi's mother joined were attempting to correct the problems with mainstream feminist and antiracist movements. They were not trying to exclude Black men and white women from their political movements. Rather, they wanted to create a space that centered Black women, in order to help make feminist and antiracist movements more inclusive overall.

For Black women, racism and sexism intertwine to create gendered racism. Kimberlé Crenshaw developed the concept of "intersectionality" to explain why antiracist movements must also fight sexism, and vice versa. Kendi offers some examples of gendered racism: for instance, eugenicist doctors sterilized hundreds of thousands of Black women in the 20th century. Today, Black and Latinx women earn less than any other race-gender. American culture also idealizes "weak White women" as the ideal of femininity. At the same time, it portrays Black men as either dangerous criminals (if they are strong and assertive) or insufficiently masculine.

Because everybody lives at the "intersection" of multiple identities (like race and gender), people's experiences are not fully reducible to any of those identities alone. By taking this into account, social movements can support people holistically rather than just supporting one dimension of them. This makes movements more successful and helps them link up with movements aimed at other forms of oppression.

Kendi quotes Kimberlé Crenshaw's call for feminism and antiracism to address the intersections of gender and race. Black women built an activist movement around intersectionality and made it possible for everyone belonging to multiple groups to do the same.

Based on Crenshaw's vision of intersectionality, Kendi shows that antiracist movements must recognize and fight all forms of inequity in order to truly be effective and inclusive. In fact, he envisions a web of interlaced movements that all center different kinds of experiences and specifically focus on fighting for different kinds of equity.

CHAPTER 15: SEXUALITY

Kendi defines queer racism as the policies and supporting ideas that cause inequity among race-sexualities (groups defined by both race and sexuality, like homosexual Black men). Queer antiracism creates equity among race-sexualities—which, like race-genders or race-classes, are defined by the intersection of two identities. Queer racism leads to worse outcomes for same-sex Black couples, compared to both same-sex white couples and opposite-sex Black couples.

Just like gender racism, queer racism involves the intersection of two different forms of inequity that can't be fully separated for the people who experience them. It would be incorrect to say that queer Black people face the sum of the inequities that heterosexual Black people or queer white people face. Rather, racism and homophobia or transphobia intertwine in non-heterosexual or gender-nonconforming Black people's experiences.

Kendi explains that in the late 19th century, scholars theorized homosexuality and Blackness in the same way: by viewing both as physiological disorders. For instance, they argued that white women's sex organs were superior to Black women's and suggested that Black people and homosexual people were both hypersexual by nature. This led to the powerful queer racist myth that non-heterosexual Black people were hypersexual.

Prejudiced pseudoscience is not only an issue when it comes to racism. It also helped justify homophobia and sexism, setting the stage for these forces to combine and produce more severe inequities among race-gender and race-sexuality groups.

Kendi's best friend at Temple University was a fellow graduate student named Weckea. Initially, Kendi didn't know that Weckea was gay, and when he found out, he was surprised: Weckea did not fit his stereotypes about gay people (hypersexuality and effeminacy). Although Kendi eventually learned that people inhabit their genders in many different ways, he always wondered why Weckea didn't come out to him directly. He realized that it was because of his own homophobic streak. To save his friendship with Weckea, Kendi committed to unlearning homophobia.

Kendi's friendship with Weckea showed him how little he truly understood about queer people's experiences in the United States, and in the Black community in particular. Weckea's reluctance to come out shows how, unless antiracist spaces and communities specifically commit to fighting homophobia as well, they often end up being exclusionary and unaccommodating to queer people.

Queer antiracists refuse to believe in a hierarchy of race-sexualities and try to undo inequities among them. Genuine antiracists can't be homophobic or transphobic. It's important to recognize that Black trans women have some of the most difficult lives of any group in the United States: their life expectancy is only 35 years. Kendi explains that antiracism requires him to understand the privileges of being cisgender and heterosexual, while working to advance the struggles of his peers who don't have those privileges.

Kendi emphasizes the importance of highlighting trans people's struggles for legal recognition, social equality in their communities and workplaces, and protection from the disproportionate violence they often face. In particular, Black trans women are often excluded from both queer and antiracist movements, which end up ignoring their needs as a result. By recognizing his own privileges, Kendi is not denying that he, too, faces other forms of inequity or prejudice. Rather, he is making the point that cisgender and heterosexual people need to recognize the differences between their experiences and queer people's experiences in order to make space for queer people in social justice movements.

Kendi reflects on how Yaba and Kaila influenced him. They taught him that antiracism is impossible without defending women and queer people of color, and they showed him how to eloquently point out sexism and homophobia. They also recommended excellent books that helped Kendi overcome his own gender and queer racism. Although Kendi was afraid of Yaba and Kaila at first, expecting them to be dogmatic and hypersexual, this was rooted in his own sexism and homophobia. They were perfectly normal and didn't want female supremacy over men—they just wanted equity and freedom. Yaba and Kaila especially critiqued women who defended white male power. This showed Kendi that the problem is *patriarchy*, not men, and *homophobia*, not heterosexual people.

Kendi emphasizes the importance of carefully one's his own beliefs and assumptions, reading extensively, and learning to treat people respectfully through trial and error. However, when people from dominant groups ask those from marginalized groups to educate them (as Yaba and Kaila educated Kendi), this often creates an undue burden that replicates the inequities they're trying to undo.

CHAPTER 16: FAILURE

Kendi defines an activist as someone with who advocates for changes in power structures or policy. He flashes back to his experience running a Black Student Union meeting at Temple University in 2007.

Kendi's wants to distinguish true activism, which has the power to change the world, from the kinds of activity that often get called activism today—but have no real political effect.

Kendi argues that understanding racism requires explaining why antiracism has failed in the past. He's tried to do this throughout the book, like by pointing out that race is a *power* construct, not a *social* construct, and by rejecting the idea that it's possible to be "not racist." Ultimately, policy solutions to racism have to be intersectional, behaviorally and culturally antiracist, and anti-capitalist to be successful. Most solutions aren't, because they're based on "popular racial ideologies" that keep replicating the same mistakes and sometimes even worsen the problem. For instance, Black people have spent centuries trying to improve their behavior in order to convince white people to give up power. This "uplift" strategy will never work.

Reexamining history and clearly defining concepts are the two most important ways that people can educate themselves about race and racism. This is a prerequisite to effectively building a political movement to change racist policies—but it's not a replacement for this movement. In other words, antiracist ideas are necessary in order to help people unlearn racist ideas, but they also have to translate into antiracist activism and policies.

Kendi remembers a dinner date with his girlfriend Sadiqa, an easygoing, brilliant, antiracist doctor. On their date, they saw a white man grotesquely fondle a statue of the Buddha. Horrified, Sadiqa commented, "at least he's not Black." She meant that if a Black person did that, their actions would reinforce white people's prejudice against Black people. Kendi now sees that this uplift-style thinking was misguided: Black people aren't responsible for making white people "less racist." Rather, racist people should stop blaming individual behavior on a whole group. But for Black people, unlearning "uplift-suasion ideology" can take years.

This example shows how the principles of antiracist thinking can apply to people's everyday lives. Sadiqa's comment, "at least he's not Black," indirectly defends behavioral racism because it's based on the notion that a Black person's misbehavior would reflect on all Black people. In reality, anyone who conflates individual with group behavior is responsible for their own racist thinking. But Kendi does not call Sadiqa an irredeemable racist or make a big deal out of her misstep—rather, he focuses on the way he and Sadiqa both learned to transform their thinking over time.

Kendi points out that many people promote uplift-suasion ideology because of personal biases. For example, the abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison promoted it because he spent his life in the church and in the publishing industry, which tended to believe that people and society can change through education and self-reflection. But this has never worked: most people do not abandon racist ideas when they are presented with logic and reason. And these people's racist ideas aren't the cause of racial inequity: racist power is. In other words, policymakers and powerful people implement racist policies and spread racist ideas because it benefits them, so it's impossible to stop these policies and ideas by appealing to their moral conscience. For example, Lincoln only freed the slaves because it was necessary to unite the country and end the Civil War.

Uplift-suasion ideology fails to uplift or persuade because it depends on a basic misconception about how racism works. It tries to fix inequities by targeting racist ideas instead of racist policies. It's appealing to people who live their lives in the realm of ideas—like Garrison and Kendi—but people ultimately make political decisions because of self-interest. This means that a successful antiracist movement has to make policy change its primary goal.

W.E.B. Du Bois spent decades arguing that equality required educating white people, until he eventually realized that the facts did not persuade anyone. But white antiracist leaders continued to believe the same thing for decades, and even today, many people wrongly think that the civil rights movement succeeded because it educated white people. But this isn't not true: racist people in positions of power agreed to pass civil rights laws because they worried that racist discrimination would hurt the U.S.'s standing on the world stage. Although this has largely been forgotten, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. fully recognized that racism is about *power*, not morality or knowledge. Policy always changes first, and then hearts and minds can change. For that reason, effective activism has to focus on policy change.

Kendi sees antiracist activists repeating the same mistakes over and over again, because they have not correctly understood the history of racism and policy change. His goal as a historian is to correct this understanding. Now, he sees that activists have to build power in order to change policies, but racist power has deliberately refused to teach this dimension of history. This is how the truly radical dimensions of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s thought have been forgotten.

Kendi flashes back to the Black Student Union meeting he was leading. He was trying to help the Jena 6, a group of six Black men who were unfairly convicted of assault for beating up a white student, just days after that student hung nooses from a tree as a racist threat. Kendi wonders how much he was willing to sacrifice in order to save the Jena 6. He admits that, like most people, his so-called activism was about feeling better about himself, not creating change. When he proposed starting a national protest movement, the other students worried that they would get arrested, and Kendi lashed out at them. This protected his feeling of righteousness but lost their support.

Now armed with his deep understanding of history and political change, Kendi can meaningfully reflect on his own experiences with activism. While he understood that serious protests are necessary to produce change, he did not see that he needed to accommodate disagreement and persuade people to join him. Like many activists today, he ended up trying to reward and punish people's intentions, rather than building the kind of inclusive movements that actually get policies changed. This kind of movement-building is far less glamorous or righteous than simply giving a fiery speech, but it is far more effective because racism is fundamentally about power, not ideas.


Kendi thought he was being radical, but his strategy was the opposite: it helped people do nothing and reject change. Genuine antiracism isn't about purity, it's about courage—which means responding to fear with strength, when racist power relies on people responding to fear with cowardice. Kendi was being cowardly when he decided that all the other students misunderstood racism and needed to be educated. In reality, he was just blaming them for his own failure to persuade. Now, he understands that antiracists should critique and improve their strategies rather than blaming others for their failures. When they put purity before equity, activists justify inaction and cling to their own privilege. They should measure themselves by the policy changes they produce, not the ideas they believe in.

The version of activism Kendi critiques here is very common, especially in the 21st century's largely internet-based culture. Many critics mistakenly associate Kendi with this kind of activism, which condemns people who express racist ideas (rather than condemning their ideas *and giving them an opportunity to change). This form of activism is fundamentally selfish: people fight their allies in order to prove themselves, rather than fighting racist power in order to undo racism. Just as activists have to compassionately educate and accommodate others, they should also extend this compassion to themselves and strive to grow more accepting and inclusive over time.*


The Black Student Union held a demonstration—not a protest—for the Jena 6. A protest is a long-term campaign for policy change, while a demonstration is a temporary campaign to gain attention and publicity. But demonstrations usually fail, and the most they can do is "help people find the antiracist power within," which means helping them understand their own racism, learn to see different races as equals, and take action against racist policies. They can also support protest movements by channeling resources, attention, and emotional support to them. But protests are the real agents of change. They give racist people in positions of power self-interested reasons to replace racist policies with antiracist ones. While difficult and dangerous, protest is the only kind of activism that truly creates change.

The key differences between demonstrations and protests are that protests are more sustained, require greater sacrifice, and focus on policies instead of ideas. Participating in demonstrations can get people to join movements, but just as often people participate in demonstrations instead of *joining protest movements. Kendi's message is clear: because ideas only support policies, antiracist ideas only matter if they lead to antiracist policies.*

CHAPTER 17: SUCCESS

When another scholar compared racism to a **disease** at a conference, Kendi raised his hand to contest this metaphor. He was in the small, predominantly white town of Oneonta, New York, where he had his dissertation fellowship and befriended Caridad, an Afro-Latinx feminist professor.

The metaphors used to talk about racism matter because they frame people's assumptions and expectations. If racism is a disease, this implies that it's invasive but curable—rather than being an inherent part of the body (or nation).

Kendi describes what a successful antiracist future would look like: power and policies would be antiracist, not racist; there would be equity among racial groups; and racist ideas would be marginalized. But the future is in the hands of present-day people: we have to fight for it. Caridad understood that, for a professor, this meant understanding and catering to each student's needs.

Kendi envisions an antiracist world as the flipside of a racist world—not because hierarchies are turned around, but rather because policies and ideas come together to undo inequities. Building an antiracist society is an incredibly difficult goal, but Kendi believes that it's essential, and that everyone can play some part in it. Meanwhile, Caridad's teaching style speaks to Kendi's preference for equity over equality. She gave everyone what they needed, depending on their specific circumstances and experiences, in order to move them forward. This is equity. In contrast, equality would mean ignoring all the differences among students and treating them the same—which would help some but alienate others.

At the conference, Kendi asked the lecturer, Boyce Watkins, why he viewed racism as a **disease**. Kendi saw racism as "more like an organ," an essential part of American society. But Watkins ignored this question, and Kendi admits that it was misguided: he replaced Watkins's self-serving metaphor with one that served *him*. Even as an antiracist, in other words, he was totally closedminded and hypocritical.

Kendi objected to Boyce Watkins's metaphor because he thought it was important to emphasize America's historical roots. But in retrospect, he sees that he wanted to emphasize these aspects of racism in order to make himself feel better. This is similar to the self-serving college activism Kendi wrote about in the previous chapter: he was trying to protect his own feelings, not do what was best for the world.

Kendi remembers reading the work of Kwame Ture and Charles Hamilton, who defined institutional racism in 1967. They distinguished racist acts committed by and against individuals from racist acts committed by and against entire racial groups. Now, Kendi thinks that this is unhelpful—talking about "the system" is too vague. Additionally, talking about white and Black communities as a whole misleadingly suggests that all white people benefit equally from racism, and that all Black people suffer from it equally. When Kendi described racism as an organ, he was referring to this conception of racism as secret, unchangeable, and systemic. This conception implies that racism is impossible to change, but in reality, it's possible to identify the people and policies that cause racial inequity. Of course, Ture and Hamilton never intended to mislead people—in the 1960s, their goal was just to get people to oppose policies, rather than individual prejudice.

Kendi points out that Ture and Hamilton's view of racism was useful in their time, for their specific purposes. But it's not anymore, because now people generally understand that racism is a large-scale social phenomenon and not just an interpersonal one. This shows that, if antiracists want to drive political change, they have to adapt their definitions and metaphors to their specific time and place. More broadly, this reflects how racist and antiracist ideas are really only ways of supporting racist and antiracist policies. Kendi believes that this kind of knowledge should translate into real-world change.

Kendi remembers learning about Trayvon Martin's murder. Trayvon was an ordinary teenager who dreamed of being an airplane pilot, and he was visiting his mother's boyfriend in a gated community when a neighbor named George Zimmerman started following him. At the time, Kendi was busy researching how Black studies students helped transform other disciplines. He jumps back to Zimmerman stalking and calling 911 on Trayvon Martin, then shooting him dead. Soon thereafter, Alicia Garza started the Black Lives Matter movement, which motivated Kendi to write his previous book, *Stamped from the Beginning*.

Kendi has already explained why antiracist ideas need to be adapted to their time—this is part of the process he calls "antiracist progress." Now, he looks to the specific events that define racism and the struggle as he writes this book in the 21st century. Trayvon Martin's murder showed him that it's more important to build a popular understanding of racist ideas in society at large than to learn about changes limited to universities.

To write *Stamped from the Beginning*, Kendi spent three years cataloguing thousands of pages of racist ideas. This helped him understand how historical racism affected his own thinking and figure out how to undo it. Over time, he abandoned the idea of not being racist, recognized that racism is fundamentally about policies, and realized that he supported some of these policies and racist ideas—in part because of his upbringing. Kendi then recognized what antiracism requires: developing antiracist power, recognizing the intersections between racism and other forms of oppression, and finally replacing racist ideas and policies with antiracist ones. This whole process was like a mental cleanse—but the everyday physical violence of racism continues.

Kendi's earlier book Stamped from the Beginning *presents the historical examples of racism that he touches on in* How to Be an Antiracist *in much more detail. As Kendi explains here, all the conclusions he's reached about the relationship between racist policies and ideas fundamentally stem from his research for* Stamped from the Beginning. *His research process was also a process of personal growth and transformation. It helped him identify the sources of his own racist ideas and learn that antiracist ideas are only useful if they help people transform themselves and then transform society.*

CHAPTER 18: SURVIVAL

Kendi and Sadiqa eventually got married, went on a spectacular honeymoon, and moved into their new house. Then, Sadiqa learned that she had breast **cancer**. She and Kendi were devastated. Sadiqa spent a year in treatment but recovered. However, Kendi's mom got diagnosed with a less severe form of breast cancer shortly after.

After presenting a vision of antiracist transformation in society as a whole in the last two chapters, Kendi now returns to the level of the individual. After finishing his book, readers will have to decide how to push for antiracism on this same level.

The whole time Sadiqa and Kendi's mom were fighting **cancer**, Kendi was working on *Stamped from the Beginning*, which meant sifting through an endless pile of racist ideas. Although he became a professor because he thought that knowledge could solve racism, he realized that racist ideas are really about defending racist policies, the real drivers of inequity. Just like it's impossible to treat cancer by focusing just on the outward symptoms, he realized, it's impossible to solve racism by only responding to hate and ignorance. After publishing his book and going on a lecture tour, Kendi decided to start focusing his research on policy. He founded the Antiracist Research and Policy Center at American University, where he hoped to build research teams to understand and propose alternatives to racist policies.

Sadiqa and Kendi's mother's personal tragedies helped Kendi see that he should strive to influence people's real lives with his research—and that policy impacts real life in a way that ideas simply do not. It's important to fight racist ideas, because people cannot push for antiracist policies until they learn to identify and reject racist ideas. However, stopping at the level of ideas lets racism continue. True antiracist activism means emphasizing policy and pushing people who are stuck at the level of ideas.

Kendi started receiving racist threats, and his health started worsening, but he ignored both and kept working for the rest of 2017. But by early 2018, he was too sick to keep working, and he learned that he had late-stage colon **cancer**. When Sadiqa, Kendi's mom, and Kendi's dad fought cancer, Kendi always wondered why *they* had to, not *him*. Now, he had an 88 percent chance of dying within five years.

When Kendi also got cancer and learned that it was overwhelmingly likely to kill him, his research took on a new sense of urgency and significance. Although both were painful, seeing his loved ones suffer cancer was not like his own mortality.

Kendi sees racism as society's equivalent of stage-four metastatic **cancer**. It multiplies bigotries and inequities, threatening democracy and human society as a whole. After centuries, many people still deny that it exists. After receiving his diagnosis, Kendi had trouble accepting that he was probably going to die. But antiracism helped him understand: just like he had serious cancer and would probably die, but *could* survive, society has a serious racism problem and will likely fail to solve it—but it *could* do so. Rather than giving up, Kendi put all the energy he could muster into fighting for survival. And America can do the same to replace its racism with antiracism.

After rejecting the idea that illness is a useful metaphor for racism in the previous chapter, Kendi now recognizes that his fight against cancer truly is a useful metaphor for society's fight against racism. In fact, he came to this realization in the opposite direction: his antiracism helped him adapt to having cancer. The similarities between cancer and racism highlight the difficult odds that people face against each, but also people's capacity to overcome those odds. Both cancer and racism spread and worsen over time, and people have to accept that these problems exist in order to fight them.

Kendi wrote this book during a punishing chemotherapy regimen that left him barely able to get out of bed. But to heal, he had to accept and work through the pain. Ultimately, he was among the lucky 12 percent who survive. He thinks that society can survive racism too. If we could save countless lives by diverting public resources towards **cancer** research and prevention, then we can address racial inequities by dedicating public resources and time to fighting racist policy. Antiracist policy is like chemotherapy, and education and public discourse can help society stay healthy and prevent racism from relapsing.

Kendi's unlikely survival supports the metaphorical connection between cancer and racism by suggesting that society truly can become antiracist. But he also points out that there are real empirical links between them: cancer research is a priority for American society because it affects everyone, and yet racism is largely ignored at the level of national policy. In part, this is because it's much easier to identify cancer as a villain than racism—which comes from other people who are also citizens of the same nation. This explains why Kendi focuses on eradicating racism, *not fighting* racist people, *who can change over time.*

First, though, it's necessary to believe that an antiracist society is possible. Racism is only a 600-year-old power construct, and while it's vicious and fast-spreading, it's beatable. Still, Kendi doesn't have hope because he thinks that antiracism is *likely* to win—he has hope because it's impossible to win without it. Freedom requires that people fight, even against all odds.

Kendi argues for hope, but not necessarily optimism: racism has usually prevailed in the past, but can still be defeated in the future. If antiracists are too optimistic, they risk getting discouraged when things do not go as they imagined. But if they give up hope, they will simply stop fighting, which will make an antiracist future impossible.

HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Jennings, Rohan. "*How to Be an Antiracist*." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 21 Aug 2020. Web. 21 Aug 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Jennings, Rohan. "*How to Be an Antiracist*." LitCharts LLC, August 21, 2020. Retrieved August 21, 2020. https://www.litcharts.com/lit/how-to-be-an-antiracist.

To cite any of the quotes from *How to Be an Antiracist* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Kendi, Ibram X.. How to Be an Antiracist. Penguin. 2019.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Kendi, Ibram X.. How to Be an Antiracist. New York: Penguin. 2019.