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On the Travesty of whitewashing AntiRacist Education

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The Travesty of Whitewashing AntiRacist Education

Abstract

Kendi's answer to the question of 'How to be an Antiracist' is simple and succinct: to become an antiracist you must be an activist, advocating antiracist policies that engender racial equity and reduce comparable racial inequity. But the real solutions are more complex than that. He claims that the only way to undo racism is to consistently identify and describe it and then dismantle it, yet he abandons their descriptions for historically inaccurate narratives, and poorly supported autobiographical vignettes, and offers no way to identify racism, racialization, or how they manifest. The taxonomy he offers is disconnected from prevailing theories. It equates 'anti-White racism' and 'Black racism' to anti-Black racism and white supremacist violence, apprising equal validity to the terms for racial analysis. Racialized 'whiteness' is left unquestioned and omitted, and functionally maintains 'race,' 'racisms' and 'antiracism,' racialization, and their mystification. Caste, colorism, misogynoir, and transmisogynoir are discarded for morphologically procedural, and hyphenated terms such as race-genders, race-classes, and race-sexualities, as well as their corresponding intersectional frameworks. Kendi boldly attempts to engage new audiences and pique the interests of those who have disagreed with the way previous scholars have conceptualized 'race' and 'racism.'

Keywords: Anti-bias, Antiracism

Introduction

Kendi boldly attempts to engage new audiences and pique the interests of those who have disagreed with the way previous scholars have conceptualized 'race' and 'racism.' *How to Be an Antiracist* is an easily accessible, 2019 nonfiction book by Black American author and historian Ibram X. Kendi, that combines social commentary and memoir to galvanize antiracist activism. The book presents Kendi's taxonomy of racisms and antiracisms. The book is primarily anecdotal, presenting paired definitions of types of racisms and their corresponding antiracisms, with short chapters framed in episodes from Kendi's biography. Kendi's proposed definitions and musings establish a discrete taxonomy of racisms and their antiracisms over eighteen chapters. Nestled within the book is his answer to the question posed by the book's title. How do you be an antiracist? According to Kendi, to be an antiracist you must be an activist, advocating antiracist policies that engender racial equity and reduce comparable racial inequity. Despite peers arguing to shift focus to analyses of actions and systems, away from identities altogether, Kendi presents *racist* and *antiracist* as temporary, instead of immutable, identities, that describe what a person is being in any given moment, based on what they are saying or not saying, doing or not doing.

The author sees his simplified and discrete taxonomy as clear language, and a vital first step in the battle against prejudice. The author simplifies policy analysis by arguing that the intention of written policies do not matter, only their impact. He argues that if a policy is leading to racial injustice, it doesn't really matter if the policymaker intended for that policy to lead to racial

injustice. Kendi's work is seen as an effective introductory text or entrypoint for those interested in advocating to redress the impact of racism. He collapses and simplifies the analyses of other thinkers to invite more people to access antiracist works and shift towards antiracist goals.

If the goal of *How to Be an Antiracist* was to increase the number of North Americans committed to activism to make life better for Black people, this book may be one of the most effective texts to ride the wave of the Black Lives Matter movement. Taxonomies like the one Kendi offers can yield strategies for addressing interpersonal bias, stereotypes, racist policy, while dismally failing to provide resources to better understand the historical and economical origins of anti-Black, anti-Native, white supremacist ideologies. The evasiveness of terms like 'bias,' implies subjective, individual attitudes, devoid of connection to larger societal structures, Kendi's taxonomy functions in the same way.

Despite this book not being based on empirical research, and the substance of the text becoming background matter to many, it's important to unpack the ways in which Kendi's taxonomy and their morphologies undermine decades of research in Black studies, Critical Race Theory, and sociology. 'Race,' racialization and racism are complex and complicated in ways that require disentanglement, or at least acknowledgement of intersectionality that Kendi's taxonomy is ill prepared to address, and unaccustomed to engaging. A deeper analysis into Kendi's taxonomy and their morphologies and grammar reveals:
a fundamental misrepresentations in his literature review that offers a deep oversimplification of terminology; an intentional sundering of terms from their political histories and the contexts that give them meaning; a questionable placing of antiBlack racism and anti-white racism on equal footing and priority; and a misguided push for activism as the primary solution to racism. Instead of an attempt to demystify how 'race' and racialization function, Kendi reinscribes 'race' and reifies whiteness as a position of power.

Focusing on 'anti-White racism' is particularly alluring to people who identify or are identified as 'white.' Kendi employs anecdotal evidence to conclude that, "Clearly, a large percentage of Black people hold anti-Black racist ideas," (Kendi, 2019, p. 139). Prejudicial views of 'white' people originate as a logical response to centuries of hierarchical power, established upon colonial and neocolonial 'authority.' 'White' people have historically manipulated the arms of institutions to leverage state violence and state-sanctioned terrorism to establish and maintain their social, economic, and racial caste supremacy in this land. The rationalization of 'anti-White racism' intentionally excludes this empathetic understanding of fear and prejudice of 'white' people, and runs afoul of placing antiBlack racism and anti-white racism on equal footing and priority. Kendi excoriates the fields of anti-bias, antiracism, and critical race theory through his refusal to name or cite academic or peer-reviewed sources, despite upending field consensus with his introductory text.

Maintains Race and Racialization

How to be an Antiracist presents 'race' as a static identity, while maintaining the mystification of his taxonomy of racisms, never unveiling their operations, or a path to dissolve or diminish 'race,' racialization, or his various racisms. Instead, he focuses exclusively on their impact. If you identify with a 'race,' you've already accepted racism. If you identify with a 'race,' you're perpetuating the fallacy of your own racialization. Internalizing and identifying with the racialization being used to define us (ontologically) as beneath an 'Other' in a racist, supremacist ideology, is to perpetuate a manufactured inferiority.

'Race' and racialization establish mutually exclusive racial identities and ways of knowing, doing, and being. While terms like 'multicultural,' 'intercultural,' and 'transcultural' envision ethnicity or culture-based framing, 'bi-raciality' maintains mutual exclusion, while retaining racialized cosmovisions, or ways of knowing, doing, and being. Purity of race is preserved. Kendi describes racialization as a process of 'grouping colors into continental races,' 'attaching negative and positive characteristics to them,' and 'ranking the races to justify racial inequity.' The dichotomies of 'men' and 'natives,' 'Christians' and 'heathens,' 'whites' and 'nonwhite' have historical and political origins that arise out of white-European interests intent upon maintaining caste supremacy (BarOn, 1999). Historically, the most influential theories of race have themselves been racist (Mills, 1997). Most have been varieties of "more or less sophisticated biological determinism, from naive pre-Darwinian speculations to the later more elaborated views of nineteenth-century Social Darwinism and twentieth-century Nazi Rassenkunde [race-science]," (Mills, 1997, p. 125). How to be an Antiracist is no different.

The ontological argument of this lexicography imagines six static 'races,' ' "Latinx and Asian and African and European and Indigenous and Middle Eastern," (Kendi, 2019, p. 38), and posits that "one of the ironies of antiracism [is] that we must identify racially to identify the racial privileges and dangers of being in our bodies," (Kendi, 2019, p. 38). The procedural power of 'race-makers' to establish monolithic races is never deconstructed or described, nor how these 'power identities' categorize, judge, elevate, downgrade, include, or exclude other identities. Instead, a millennia of 'race-making' is ignored to further entrench these established monolithic 'races.' Kendi's framework in *How to Be an AntiRacist* reifies and further entrenches 'race,' racism, and racialization.

Sustains the Mystification of Race, Racism, and Racialization

Kendi fails to offer a description for the function of racism, opting instead to continue to mystify it through taxonomy. Kendi's taxonomy of extensional opposites, presented as types of 'racisms' and 'antiracisms,' simultaneously disjoin 'racism' from ethnicity, culture, color, class, gender, and sexuality, while conflating discrimination based on these elements as types of 'racisms.' His indecipherable taxonomy of reformulated definitions present 'race,' 'racist,' and 'racism,' as 'power constructs' of collected or merged differences organized from the micro-level of

internalized ideology to an external 'powerful collection' of policies that live socially (Kendi, 2019, p. 35).

It is important to note that Kendi does present definitions of racism that are more expansive than just the racist beliefs and attitudes, to include the institutionalized systems of oppression that maintain the privileged status of the dominant group (Feagin, 2013). Meaning that he does have a systemic understanding of 'race' and 'racism.' Despite this set up, the author dedicates very little time to understanding the genesis of these systems of oppression. Despite defining 'racism' as "a power construct of collected or merged differences organized from the micro-level… [to] policies that live socially" (Kendi, 2019, p. 35), neither power, nor the 'micro-level of internalized ideology' are ever problematized. Despite originating from the field of anti-bias/antiracism (ABAR), discussion of bias, in and of itself, is absent of meaningful critical analysis. Instead, bias is assumed to be central to racism, or the categories of racisms he defines.

Only Policies and People are Deemed Racist
In practice, the author's lenses foreground policy analysis and impact analysis. For Kendi, only policies and people can be racist, and there is no such thing as a nonracist or race-neutral policy. Who established the policy, how the policy is enforced, nor how previous configurations were iterated, are necessary for consideration. If the policy was devised to be racist, but still ends up establishing more racial equity, it is considered an 'antiracist policy.' If the outcome of the policy is more racial equity or less racial inequity, that policy is an 'antiracist' policy, even if devised to be racist policy. Kendi simplifies this analysis by arguing that racist and antiracist policies are defined exclusively by their outcomes. For Kendi, intentions aren't relevant, only whether or not the outcome of the policy was more or less racial equity or inequity.

Under Kendi's analytical framework, despite being passed specifically for the purposes of assisting newly freed Black people to protect their equal rights as citizens, the 14th Amendment could be interpreted as racist policy due to its use by conservative judges to dismantle affirmative action and efforts to desegregate schools.

Racialized Power is Omitted, While Whiteness is Left Unquestioned
The author reinscribes and reifies whiteness as a position of power by leaving 'white' racial identity unmarked, unchallenged, and unexamined, which are critical to dislodging 'whiteness' from the twin archetypes of universality and normality that legitimize racial dominance, and ascribe difference and racialized meanings to non-white groups (Escayg, 2019). A central critique of anti-bias / anti-racism (ABAR) education has been that it pays minimal attention to power, privilege, and 'whiteness' as part of their conceptual frameworks (Escayg, 2018, 2019). A persistent characteristic of ABAR is the implicit assumption that by removing 'race' and 'whiteness' from the discussion, and highlighting people's personal characteristics and socially constructed identities, that 'white' people will organically develop an 'antiracist' 'white' identity

(Escayg, 2019; Feagin, 2013). There's pervasive magical thinking that non-white children will spontaneously disentangle social currency associated with 'white' identity (Skattebol, 2005; Van Ausdale and Feagin, 2001). Just like previous conceptions of anti-bias education, Kendi jettisons the role of racialized power in the establishment or maintenance of racism as a system. This approach omits the role of racialized power in constructing and maintaining racialized imaginations and racialized futures that intentionally fail to address power dynamics. The effect is the further propagation of racialization, supremacist coercion, indoctrination, power, and 'white' supremacist harm.

A Taxonomy Disconnected From Prevailing Theories
The taxonomy Kendi presents describes 'racist' and 'antiracist,' not as pejorative slurs, but descriptive, "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 another," which "requires persistent self-awareness, constant self-criticism, and regular self- examination," (Kendi, 2019, p. 23). This framing runs counter to the professional training of counter-supremacist program facilitators and designers who use the term 'racist' as an adverb, Kendi presents his usage as a taxonomy of adjectives.

Kendi attempts etymological surgery, intentionally cleaving each of his definitions from their original context and discourse, and choosing to sunder each term from the history and contexts that gave them meaning. The theoretical underpinnings of this new lexicography are established upon the disunity of the term *double consciousness*. The term was coined by WEB DuBois as a 'peculiar' offspring born from the simultaneous, opposing schema, of colonized subject's experience in an oppressive society, formed at the intersection of 'Negro' and 'American' (Itzigsohn and Brown, 2020; DuBois, 2015). DuBois' *dual consciousness* was a phenomena imperceptible and 'behind the veil' for Black and other nonwhite people to better understand the sociological impacts of living in an anti-Black society in the Americas. Kendi retools DuBois' *dual consciousness* into a "more precisely termed *dueling consciousness*" (Kendi, 2019, p. 29) to describe how all people supposedly struggle between assimilationist, segregationist, and antiracist ontologies. A few pages later, he clarifies that white people, in particular, vacillate between "the slave trader and the missionary, the proslavery exploiter and the antislavery civilizer, the eugenicist and the melting potter, the mass incarcerator and the mass developer, the Blue Lives Matter and the All Lives Matter, the not-racist nationalist and the not-racist American," (Kendi, 2019, p. 31). These traits are described as inherently natural to these 'race' groupings.

Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term *intersectionality* to better describe and analyze the complex, simultaneous, multiplicative, interstructuring systems of domination and subordination inscribed in relationships (Crenshaw, 1991; Osborne, 2013; Schüssler Fiorenza, 1992). While mentioned briefly by Kendi, his taxonomy and Crenshaw's intersectionality appear mutually exclusive

because he procedurally foregrounds 'race' before other identifies, and excludes terminology used to express intersectional analysis. Whereas others would cite theories of caste to understand the intersections of class and 'race,' Kendi bucks the trend for his proposed 'race-classes.' Caste, colorism, misogynoir, and transmisogynoir are discarded for morphologically procedural, and hyphenated terms such as race-genders, race-classes, and race-sexualities. Their corresponding intersectional frameworks are also left by the wayside. Kendi's race-genders, race-classes, and race-sexualities, among others, begin with 'race'-based analysis, privileging racialization before other lenses. Intersectional theorists are concerned with how these systems mutually construct one another, or how they 'articulate' with one another' (Collins, 1998; Osborne, 2013), Kendi is focused on narratives of 'race' and racialization before other conceptions of identity, and to the exclusion of simultaneous, intersectional analysis. His definitions erase connections to the research and authors of their originating theories. Proper citations and citational ethics are an intersectional womanist (Black feminist) praxis that could be better exemplified in this text.

Excluding White Racism, Foregrounding Anti-White and Black Racism
'Anti-White racism' is the first definition after the chapter on 'Power' that is not paired. Instead, it's juxtaposed by the following chapter on the "Powerless Defense: the illusory, concealing, disempowering, and racist idea that Black people can't be racist because Black people don't have power," (Kendi, 2019, p. 136). Clearly, a euphemism for 'Black racism.' If following the morphology of the rest of his lexicography, the initial term presented would have been *White racism*, or racism enacted by 'white' people. Its logical opposite would follow as *White antiracism*, whose definition would be something akin to white people leading antiracism work. Including *White racism* as a term could have helped to clarify the fundamental power construct that defines racism: white supremacist ideology. This functions to fracture a space of alterity that equates 'anti-White racism' and 'Black racism' to anti-Black racism and white supremacist violence, apprising equal validity to the terms for racial analysis. Focusing on 'anti-White racism' is particularly alluring to people who identify or are identified as 'white,' because the framing ignores centuries of state-sponsored violence exercised by 'white' people to maintain their social caste; and places instances of prejudice against 'white' people on equal footing and priority.

Table 1:					
Morphology Foregrounding 'Anti-White' and 'Black Racism'					
(P)	(Q)	(P)	(Q)	(P)	(Q)
no prefix	White racism	White	racism	White	racism
(-P)	(Q)	(-P)	(Q)	(-P)	(Q)
anti-	White racism	anti-White	racism	Black	racism

Kendi's exclusion of this term in this context is puzzling. Instead, the author juxtaposes *anti-White racism* with the *powerlessness defense* in the next chapter, where he misconstrues Black people in positions of institutional power in the US as 'Black power.' While *Black racism* is not included in the presented terminology, it appears to be the thesis of *Black,* chapter 11: "Clearly, a large percentage of Black people hold anti-Black racist ideas," (Kendi, 2019, p. 139). While I agree that 'Black on Black' racism can be enacted in these limited instances by Black people in positions of power in the US, other lenses of analysis, such as colorism, misogynoir, and transmisogynoir, are usually the frameworks used by researchers and theories to understand when intraracial prejudices or discrimination manifest between Black people. Logically, had Kendi followed the morphology of his new terms, this chapter would also include *Black antiracism* as a parallel term to *White antiracism*.

Instead, Kendi reorients his taxonomy to prioritize *anti-White racism*, and places it discursively on par to *anti-Black racism*, another prominent term conspicuously absent from this book. Emphasizing '*anti-White racism*' excludes historical considerations, since no systems of anti-White racism have ever existed, and anti-White policies don't sustain institutional power in this country. The rhetorical emphasis on *Black racism* instead of white racial supremacism, avoids the discussion of 'white' identities, 'white' privilege, and reproduces the dominance of whiteness (Escayg, 2019).

Table 2:					
Morphology Backgrounding 'Anti-Black Racism'					
(P)	(Q)	(P)	(Q)	(P)	(Q)
no prefix	White racism	White	racism	White	racism
(-P)	(-Q)	(-P)	(-Q)	(-P)	(-Q)
anti-	Black racism	anti-White	antiracism	Black	antiracism

Kendi abandons analyses of capitalism, anticapitalist projects and paradigms, and previously established intersectional frameworks for his definitions of *class racist* and *antiracist anticapitalist*, the most syntactically distinct pair of *racisms* and *antiracisms* in the author's taxonomy. A cursory search would pull various examples of socialisms that define themselves as inherently antiracist and anticapitalist, such as the PanAfricanisms of Kwame Nkrumah, Sekou Toure, and Kwame Toure. The choice to use 'anticapitalist' instead of 'socialist' (or 'communist') exhibits a clear political stance emblematic of the McCarthyism that is still prevalent in the colonial and imperial Anglo-Capitalist nations of the global north. While the author proclaims that racism

and capitalism are inextricably linked, he still presents a distinct 'racial capitalism,' without description or definition, that etymologically and morphologically detaches race from capitalism. Furthermore, his historic analysis misrepresents socialist and communist movements for decolonization as attempts to "push a segregationist or post-racial program in order to alienate racist White workers" (Kendi, 2019, p. 159), instead of intentional efforts to repair the harm and unequal distribution of resources caused by colonial and neocolonial regimes. Instead of proving this claim through careful consideration or comparison between manifestations of racism in capitalist and socialist countries, Kendi presents a few paragraphs of historical notes without supporting citations. The author presents the connection as self-evidently true. There is a deep resistance to engage the history of racial capitalism.

Kendi is peddling a 'white'-friendly 'wokeness' that stands in mutually exclusive opposition to multiple seminal theories in the field. Kendi excoriates the fields of anti-bias, antiracism, and critical race theory through his refusal to name or cite academic or peer-reviewed sources. Those terms that are cited, 'double consciousness' by WEB Du Bois, and 'intersectionality' by Kimberlé Crenshaw, are divorced from their origins and meanings. In supplanting well-established terms for what he considers more accessible definitions and delineations, Kendi boldly attempts to engage new audiences and pique the interests of those who have disagreed with the way previous scholars have conceptualized 'race' and 'racism. *How to Be an AntiRacist* by Ibram X. Kendi effectively rebukes and discards the fields that birthed the terms he appropriates for his lexicography to make the discussion more palatable for previously opposed audiences. His tautological taxonomy can be adopted easily because of the ways he has abandoned complexity, theory, history, and context to make antiracism more palatable for 'white' audiences. While taxonomies like the one Kendi offers can yield strategies for addressing interpersonal bias, stereotypes, and racist policy, this text offers no tools to analyze, disrupt, deprioritize, or dissolve racism or resonant supremacist hierarchies like the ones formed by gender, sexual, and class supremacy, among others. Kendi fails to provide resources to better understand the historical and economical origins of anti-Black, anti-Native, and white supremacist racism. Few if any treatments have so reductively and simple-mindedly defined racism and bias. These terms, used in this evasive manner, imply subjective, individual attitudes, devoid of connection to larger societal structures. Kendi's taxonomy functions in the same way.

Table 3:			
The Taxonomy of How to be an AntiRacist			
racist (p. 13)	One who is supporting a racist policy through their actions or inaction or expressing a racist idea	*antiracist (p. 13)*	One who is supporting an antiracist policy through their actions or expressing an antiracist idea

Racial inequity (p. 18)	When two or more racial groups are not standing on approximate equal footing	Racial equity (p. 18)	When two or more racial groups are standing on a relatively equal footing
Racist policy (p. 18)	Any measure that produces or sustains racial inequity between racial groups. Replacing:'institutional racism' & 'structural racism'	antiracist policy (p. 18)	Any measure that produces or sustains racial equity between racial groups
assimilationist (p. 24)	One who is expressing the racist idea that a racial group is culturally or behaviorally inferior and is supporting cultural or behavioral enrichment programs to develop that racial group	segregationist (p. 24)	One who is expressing the racist idea that a permanently inferior racial group can never be developed and is supporting policy that segregates away that racial group
antiracist (p. 24)	One who is expressing the idea that racial groups are equals and none needs developing, and is supporting policy that reduces racial inequity	race (p. 35)	A power construct of collected or merged difference that lives socially
Biological racism (p. 44)	One who is expressing the idea that the races are meaningfully different in their biology and these differences create a hierarchy of value	Biological antiracism (p. 44)	One who is expressing the idea that the races are meaningfully the same in their biology and there are no genetic racial differences
Ethnic racism (p. 56)	A powerful collection of racist policies that lead to inequity between racialized ethnic group and are substantiated by racist ideas about racialized groups	Ethnic antiracism (p. 56)	A powerful collection of antiracist policies that lead to equity between racialized ethnic groups and are substantiated by antiracist ideas about racialized ethnic groups
Bodily racism (p. 69)	One who is perceiving certain racialized bodies as more animal-like and violent than others	Bodily antiracism (p. 69)	One who is humanizing, deracializing, and individualizing nonviolent and violent behavior
Cultural racism (p. 81)	One who is creating a cultural standard and imposing a cultural hierarchy among racial groups	Cultural antiracism (p. 81)	One who is rejecting cultural standards and equalizing cultural differences among racial groups
Behavioral racism (p. 93)	One how is making individuals responsible for perceived behavior of racial groups and making racial groups responsible for the behavior of individuals	Behavioral antiracism (p. 93)	One who is making racial group behavior fictional and individual behavior real
Colorism	A powerful collection of racist	Color	A powerful collection of antiracist

(p. 107)	policies that lead to inequities between light people and Dark people, supported by racist ideas about Light and Dark people	*antiracism (p. 107)*	policies that lead to equity between Light people and Dark people, supported by antiracist ideas about Light and Dark people
anti-White racism (p. 122)	One who is classifying people of European descent as biologically, culturally, or behaviorally inferior or conflating the entire race of White people with racist power	*powerlessness defense (p. 136)*	The illusory, concealing, disempowering, and racist idea that Black people can't be racist because Black people don't have power
Class racism (p. 151)	One who is racializing the classes, supporting policies of racial capitalism against those race-classes, and justifying them by racist ideas about those racie-classes	*antiracist anticapitalist (p. 151)*	One who is opposing racial capitalism
Space racism (p. 166)	A powerful collection of racist policies that lead to resource inequity between racialized spaces or the elimination of certain racialized spaces, which are substantiated by racist ideas about racialized spaces	*Space antiracism (p. 166)*	A powerful collection of antiracist policies that lead to racial equity between integrated and protected racialized spaces, which are substantiated by antiracist ideas about racialized spaces
Gender racism (p. 181)	A powerful collection of racist policies that lead to inequity between race-genders and are substantiated by racist ideas about race-genders	*Gender antiracism (p. 181)*	A powerful collection of antiracist policies that lead to equity between race-genders and are substantiated by antiracist ideas about race-genders
Queer racism (p. 193)	A powerful collection of racist policies that lead to inequity between race0sexualities and are substantiated by racist ideas about race-sexualities	*Queer antiracism (p. 193)*	A powerful collection of antiracist policies that lead to equity between race-sexualities and are substantiated by antiracist ideas about race-sexualities
activist	One who has a record of power or policy change		

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