

Making Room for Dignity: A Review of Ibram X. Kendi's How to Be an Antiracist

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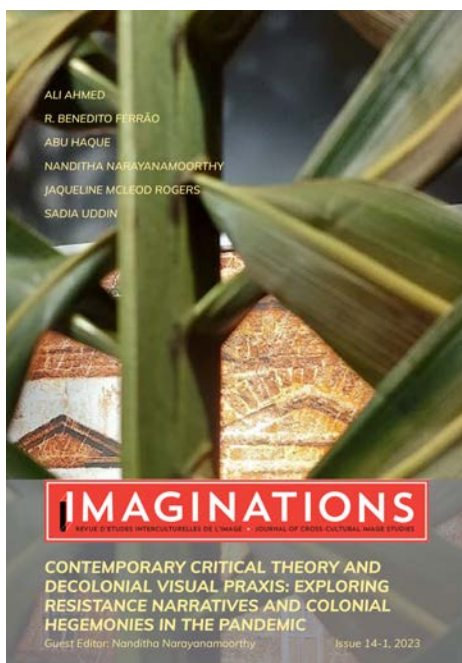
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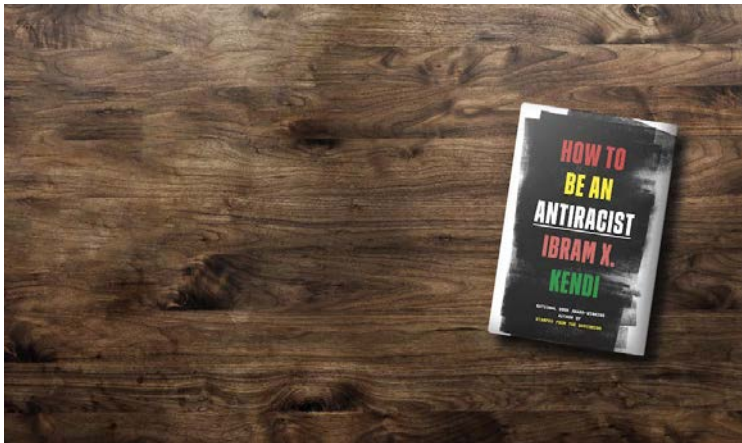


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MAKING ROOM FOR DIGNITY: A REVIEW OF IBRAM X. KENDI'S HOW TO BE AN ANTIRACIST

ALI AHMED

In illustrating the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized, Frantz Fanon writes in *Black Skin, White Masks* that “the feeling of inferiority of the colonized is the correlative to the European’s feeling of superiority. Let us have the courage to say it outright: It is the racist who creates his inferior” (93). Writing a little over fifty years later about how power and policy maintain racial disparity and the need to commit to opposing it, Ibram X. Kendi begins *How to Be an Antiracist* with Fanon’s phenomenology of otherness by wondering “if it was my poor sense of self that first generated my poor sense of my people. Or was it my poor sense of my people that inflamed a poor sense of myself?” (9). This question embarrassed me; I wondered if my poor sense of the people where I was born—poor enough that I would not call them “my people” nor willingly name the place—meant that I am racist. But while that word has become a label, Kendi suggests that it is only a descriptive term that applies from one scenario to another, not an absolute and essential marker. This, he believes, can be an invitation to come to terms with one’s racial biases, as we are too quick to cower behind the line “I’m not racist”—a phrase he wants to remove from our vocabulary.



Kendi's argument is simple: once we overcome our fear of acknowledging our potential racial biases, we must commit to overcoming disparities between racial groups, the most prevalent one in his study being that of average household income between the White population and that of racial minorities in the United States. What is much more complex, however, is the landscape of conversations amidst which his argument appears. The comments sections of his talks on YouTube are filled with disparaging remarks about him being a "race-peddler." And some Black intellectuals, like John McWhorter—Professor of English and Comparative Literature at Columbia, who argues that anti-racism is a new religion as harmful as racism itself—question Kendi's intellectual credibility. Critics like McWhorter and Coleman Hughes push back against the culture of political correctness and "wokeism," and Ibram Kendi appears to them as someone who supports the surveillance of thought. While they admit that racism is real, race itself is not the primary issue for them as it is for Kendi, and they are wont to suggest that disparities are caused more by varying cultural conventions than racial prejudice. But the argument of culture—which extends to the claim by some factions that "Black-on-Black" crime is a product of said culture—is passionately rejected by Kendi and Ta-Nehisi Coates, both of whom retort that that violence is perpetuated by *enculturation*, predicated on structur-

al racism, rather than culture, as Fanon, too, suggests in his study of colonial Martinique.

I believe there is relative merit to both sides—those of Kendi and of Hughes, who makes the argument against the privileging of race as a category much more effectively than McWhorter. And as divergent as they might seem, there is real possibility for reconciliation. What complicates matters further is how their respective claims are abused by corporatism—corporations adopt slogans such as “Black Lives Matter” while continuing to exploit labour—on the one hand, and White supremacists—who rephrase that slogan, deny racism, and hide their privilege behind colourblindness—on the other.

How to Be an Antiracist reads more like *How I came to Be an Antiracist: And Why You Should Be One, Too*. Kendi’s narrativization of his early reckoning with what Fanon calls “the fact of Blackness,” and then his navigating through fear, hatred, and disappointment, ultimately leading to a not uncalm denouement, could be replicated by almost any member of a racial minority. And perhaps that is the point. But what I find particularly worthwhile is his committed anti-essentialist stance. “Race is a mirage,” Kendi points out in a section that perhaps his critics have not noticed, “but one that we do well to see, while never forgetting it is a mirage, never forgetting that it’s the powerful light of racist power that makes that mirage” (51). What powers that light? Self-interest, as he suggests near the end. In short, being an antiracist means to accord the other the dignity they deserve, and that dignity demands that we treat people as ends unto themselves, not as synecdoche of a category; only thus do we prevent reifying the mirage of race, useful though it remains for identifying structural inequality.

There are few thinkers in the Western tradition who, within and through their existentialist projects, have thought about alterity as profoundly as Fanon and Kierkegaard. While Fanon articulates the anguish of the colonized other, Kierkegaard lays out a poetics of being that addresses the despair of each individual. In his *Works of Love*, he suggests that “the differences of life are only like the player’s costumes, or like a travelling cloak...but in actual life, one fastens the

upper garment of [their] difference so tightly that it completely conceals the fact that this difference is an outer garment, because the inner glory of the likeness to others never or so very infrequently shines through, as it nevertheless should and ought to do" (72). Kendi makes a somewhat Kierkegaardian turn, but for him, "terminating racial categories is potentially the last, not the first, step in the antiracist struggle" (75). While I agree with the sentiment, I do not think the struggle is a linear one. The case for anti-racism—a subset of the argument for the dignity of all life—will need to be, in varying degrees, continually made against the forces that commodify and colonize life.

These last two years, what with the deepening of multiple crises, have been a particular strain on our moral imagination, dividing us even more into ideological positions pre-generated by the logic of power. But we know that what might pass as mere fact is not necessarily true, and a world of dignity is never just given but requires deliberate moral commitment. *How to Be an Antiracist* should thus, I believe, be read in conversation with its critics, but also Kant's defense of the fundamental moral law and Fanon's trenchant critique of colonization, among other works. Because without the courage to meditate on one's own prejudices, the whole project of what Judith Butler calls a livable world would be unconceivable.

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