

# Acting in Solidarity: Ibram X. Kendi's *How to Be Anti-Racist* Through a Climate Lens

Climate Solutions Accelerator - 2021 Book Discussion Series



## Purpose:

- Engage climate activists and advocates in collaboratively learning about anti-racism
- Develop a shared understanding of the intersectionality of race and climate
- Identify concrete steps to integrate anti-racist actions into our climate activism

## Session 1: Racism and Anti-Racism (Chapters 1 - 6)

### Themes/Goals:

- Clearly define racism, antiracism, and other key terms
  - Understand the importance of having shared definitions
  - Understand that being racist (and antiracist) is an action, not an identity
- Inspire self-reflection and recognition of dueling consciousness
- Understand the connection between power and racism

**Summary:** Racism and climate change are inextricably linked. In order for there to be a successful climate movement, we need to grapple with and recognize the connections between the twin crises of racism and climate change. Dr. Kendi uses definitions as a central theme of the book, discussing the importance of meanings and providing us with definitions we can use in our work as individuals and activists. Also, Dr. Kendi's writing includes many examples of self-reflection and voices his experiences with internalized racism or dueling consciousness.

### Breakout Group Discussion Questions:

1. Who are you and what brings you here today?
2. In *How to Be an Antiracist*, we learn a lot about Kendi's family and his own *positionality*. Among other things, Kendi states he is "one generation removed from picking cotton for pocket change... outside Savannah." Introduce yourself and your own positionality; what are you "one generation removed from"?<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Bud Werner Memorial Library <https://steamboatlibrary.org/events/one-book-steamboat/discussion-guide-how-be-antiracist>

3. Kendi writes, "Like fighting an addiction, being an antiracist requires persistent self-awareness, constant self-criticism, and regular self-evaluation" (p. 23). What strategies do you use to recognize and address your own racist ideas and behaviors?
4. Kendi defines a racist as "someone who is supporting a racist policy by their actions or inaction or expressing a racist idea" (p. 22). He also says, "Racist and antiracist are not fixed identities. We can be racist one minute and an antiracist the next. What we say about race, what we do about race, in each moment, determines what -- not who -- we are" (p. 10). Share an example of a time when Kendi's definition of racist would have described you. (Consider giving participants a moment to quietly reflect on the question and jot down their thoughts on paper, before sharing with the group).
5. Kendi writes, "An antiracist treats and remembers individuals as individuals" (p. 44). How does this differ from the way people of color are typically treated in our culture and in our local climate movement?
6. Kendi recounts the history of race as a power construct. He writes, "Race is a mirage, but one that humanity has organized itself around in very real ways" (p. 54). He also says, "A racist power creates racist policies out of raw self-interest; the racist policies necessitate racist ideas to justify them" (p. 42). Have you heard this before? What is your response to hearing the story of Prince Henry enslaving Africans? And Linnaeus' racial hierarchy? How do these mesh with stories you have heard about race growing up?<sup>2</sup>
7. How has racist power contributed to creating the climate crisis, and how does it continue to play out and hamper progress on climate?
8. How can we use Dr. Kendi's examples of self-reflection in the book in our own lives? For instance, he talks about Dueling-Consciousness. What does he mean by that? And how does dueling-consciousness play out in our work as climate activists?
9. What should white climate activists who are striving to be antiracist do to ensure that their organizations are welcoming to BIPOC? What assimilationist and segregationist pitfalls will they need to avoid?
10. What other points from the first six chapters of Kendi's book stood out for you as being especially important or thought-provoking?
11. What other questions do you have about race and racism that you are hoping to learn more about?

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<sup>2</sup> <https://dce.olemiss.edu/how-to-be-an-antiracist-reading-guide-part-1/>

## Session 2: Racism, Self-Interest and Policy (Chapters 7 - 12)

### **Themes/Goals:**

- Identify racist ideas that environmentalists commonly hold and ways to dismantle them
- Explore how the culture of our local climate movement reinforces white supremacy
- Identify approaches to addressing climate change that frontline communities see as "false solutions"
- Identify how the self-interest of white people and white environmentalists influences climate policy
- Identify ways that white environmentalists can use their privilege to advance climate justice goals?
- Begin to explore the intersection of capitalism, racism, and climate

**Summary:** Dr. Kendi talks about racism stemming from policy and self-interest, not hate. There are many proposed policies designed to address climate change that can be seen as problematic in regards to racism and environmental justice. We want to acknowledge the contention and debate within the mainstream environmental, environmental justice and climate justice movements around various types of policies. For instance, market-based approaches like a carbon tax or fee and dividend can be seen as problematic and identified as false solutions. EJ organizations are similarly wary of over-emphasis on technological approaches.

### **Breakout Group Discussion Questions:**

1. According to Kendi, "'Civilization' is often a polite euphemism for cultural racism" (p. 85). He also says, "Whoever makes the cultural standard makes the cultural hierarchy. The act of making a cultural standard and hierarchy is what creates cultural racism" (p. 83). Where do you see evidence of white supremacy culture and cultural hierarchy in your daily life?
2. Kendi talks about aspects of culture like fresh fashion, Black church, soul food, and Hip Hop. Do any of Kendi's descriptions challenge racialized images and stereotypes for you? How might we, as cultural antiracists, reject cultural standards in these areas and equalize cultural differences among racial groups?
3. In our role as climate activists, what can we do to break down white supremacy culture and be cultural antiracists? How would this enrich our local climate movement?
4. In Kendi's discussion of behavioral racism, he says that "racial-group behavior is a figment of the racist's imagination" (p. 94) and "every time someone racializes behavior -- describing something as

- 'Black Behavior' -- they are expressing a racist idea" (p. 95). What examples have you seen of white environmentalists engaging in behavioral racism?
5. Being an environmentalist is sometimes stereotyped as an activity for white people. What is holding this idea in place and what can we do to dismantle it?
  6. When discussing the education system and standardized testing, Kendi points out that "the racial problem is the opportunity gap...not the achievement gap" (p. 103). Is a similar opportunity gap limiting the diversity of our local climate movement?
  7. In Chapter 10, Kendi states, "Ordinary white people benefit from racist policies, though not nearly as much as racist power, and not nearly as much as they could from an equitable society" (p. 129). He also says, "Racist power manipulates ordinary White people into resisting equalizing policies by drilling them on what they are losing with equalizing policies and how those equalizing policies are anti-White" (p. 130). Identify a racist policy or racist power that "ordinary white people" like us benefit from.
  8. In what ways does protecting your own privilege impede your commitment to fighting for equality and taking anti-racist action? And when you recognize that your ideas and behaviors are motivated by self-interest, how do you address that?
  9. In the book, Kendi briefly mentions climate change and links inaction to racist policies. Specifically he says, "Do-nothing climate policy is racist policy, since the predominantly non-White global south is being victimized by climate change more than the Whiter Global north, even as the Whiter global north is contributing more to its acceleration" (p. 21). How can this thinking inform our own climate activism and motivate policy-makers to take action on climate?
  10. In what other ways do we see racist policies or practices reflected in the climate movement? How do we contribute to them, and how can we dismantle them?
  11. In chapter 12, Kendi talks extensively about the relationship between capitalism and racism, calling them "the conjoined twins." He links this to climate change, saying, "The conjoined twins are again struggling to stay alive and thrive as their own offspring -- inequality, war, and climate change -- threaten to kill them, and all of us, off" (p. 157). He also says that capitalism's conservative defenders define it as "the freedom to exploit people into economic ruin; the freedom to assassinate unions; the freedom to prey on unprotected consumers, workers, and environments; the freedom to value quarterly profits over climate change," etc. (p. 161). To what extent do you agree with his assessment? As climate activists, how can we best navigate this politically fraught intersection? What are the challenges and benefits associated with explicitly acknowledging the relationship between capitalism, climate change, and racism? And how would working at this intersection change your current approach to climate activism?
  12. When environmental justice groups say that market-based solutions such as carbon fee and dividend are false solutions, what do they mean by that?

13. What other points from the first six chapters of Kendi's book stood out for you as being especially important or thought-provoking?
14. What other questions do you have about the intersection of race and climate issues?

### **Session 3: Solidarity in Climate Activism (Chapters 13 - 18)**

#### **Themes/Goals:**

- Understand the intersectionality of climate and race
- Identify strategies for bringing anti-racism into climate activism
- Define effective activism
- Encourage asset-framing and appreciative inquiry

**Summary:** Bring together concepts discussed in previous sections with understanding of effective activism to identify strategies for effective antiracist climate activism and barriers to effective antiracist climate activism.

#### **Breakout Discussion Questions:**

1. What key, local equity issues can be addressed through an intersectional approach to climate activism? (If they can't think of anything, prompt them to consider housing, transportation, poverty, jobs, racism, health disparities, etc.).
2. Kendi writes, "Black individuals have, of course, suffered trauma from slavery and ongoing oppression. Some individuals throughout history have exhibited negative behaviors related to this trauma... But there is a thin line between an antiracist saying individual Blacks have suffered trauma and a racist saying Blacks are a traumatized people. There is similarly a thin line between an antiracist saying slavery was debilitating and a racist saying Blacks are a debilitated people" (p. 97). How can this perspective inform our approach to intersectional climate activism?
3. Kendi writes, "White supremacist is code for anti-human, a nuclear ideology that poses an existential threat to human existence" (page ?). How are white supremacists and their ideology harmful to all of humanity—including white people? Climate activists talk about the existential threat climate change poses to human society and ecology. How is this similar to and different from the threat of white supremacy?
4. Dr. Kendi defines the term activist as "One who has a record of power or policy change" (p. 201). What are your thoughts on this definition? Using this definition, do you consider yourself an activist? Why or why not?

5. Kendi says that antiracist efforts have historically failed because of failed solutions and strategies that are rooted in failed racial ideologies. Specifically, he points to incorrect conceptions of race as a social construct (as opposed to a power construct), of racial history as a singular march of racial progress (instead of a duel of antiracist and racist progress), and of racism as rooted in ignorance and hate (instead of powerful self-interest). Do climate activists typically rely on similarly failed ideologies? What incorrect ideas about climate change are we holding onto that get in the way of real climate progress?

6. Kendi quotes W.E.B. Du Bois, speaking about racism in 1934. The quote reads, "Today there can be no doubt that Americans know the facts; and yet they remain for the most part indifferent and unmoved." Research shows that most Americans now acknowledge that climate change is real, yet many are similarly indifferent and unmoved. We can't afford to wait 80+ years for real climate action, so what strategies might Kendi advise us climate activists to pursue?

7. Kendi asks, "What if instead of a feelings advocacy we had an outcome advocacy that put equitable outcomes before our guilt and anguish?" (p. 210). As we strive to become antiracist climate activists, what would it look like to focus on equitable outcomes instead of feelings?

8. Kendi asks, "What if antiracists constantly self-critiqued our own ideas? What if we blamed our ideologies and methods, studied our ideologies and methods, refined our ideologies and methods again and again until they worked? When will we finally stop the insanity of doing the same thing repeatedly and expecting a different result?" (p. 214). Which of your ideologies and methods warrant self-critique as you strive to become a more effective antiracist climate activist?

9. Kendi distinguishes between demonstrations and protests. He asserts that "the most effective protests create an environment whereby changing the racist policy becomes in power's self-interest, like desegregating businesses because the sit-ins are driving away customers." He goes on to say, "Organizing and protesting are much harder and more impactful than mobilizing and demonstrating. Seizing power is much harder than protesting power and demonstrating its excesses" (p. 216). What can we learn from this idea?

## **Additional Resources:**

Readings:

[Discussion Guidelines](#)

[Jemez Principles for Democratic Organizing](#)

[White Supremacy Culture](#)

[Equitable and Just National Climate Platform](#)

Videos:

[EJ and Federal Climate Policy: 540W/Main and Climate Solutions Accelerator:](#)

[Dr. Nicky Sheats, EJ Scholar \(6 min video\): \(cumulative impacts and climate policy\)](#)