Madison Perry (mep7da)

Dr. Tamika Carey

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**Race Resources: a Kit for Well-Meaning White People**

***“Consider this a workbook”* - Cleage**

Those words come from Pearl Cleage’s piece “Writing for my Life” and have been at the front of my mind as I have considered this kit (both the assembly of it and the digestion of its components) a type of workbook. I observe that unlearning is a lifelong process. The latent racist ideas on which American society was designed are continually twisted to justify objectification and exploitation of marginalized people and are inextricable from any aspect of our personal realities. There’s no shortage of exigencies for a person to seek deeper understanding of race, but I am assembling this kit as a white woman for white people because the re-education responsibility must fall on us.

It is not our Black colleagues and neighbors’ responsibility to diplomatically explain microaggressions to us. The implicit white expectation of Black people (or members of other historically marginalized communities) to be spokespeople and resource libraries is a remnant of respectability politics: “the idea that people in marginalized groups can sway people who have negative opinions of them by being beyond moral reproach, or actively endeavoring to make the people with those opinions less uncomfortable”(NPR). It’s a continuation of subjugation through responsibility-shifting, not unlike other “victim-blaming” arguments. This mindset is an extension of ideas about “palatable” Blackness and only serves to cast work and blame onto the historically marginalized while “the oppressors maintain their position and evade their responsibility for their own actions” (Lorde, 1983).

Further, what might seem like the polar opposite of denial of responsibility can be just as toxic; retreating into white guilt is just as useless to progress as quiet complicity with latent oppression. Recognition of our privilege is not equivalent to the dismantling of the systems that enable that privilege. I am assembling this kit because we must 1.) recognize that racist settler colonialism is a man-made construction, not the inherent nature of our world and 2.) develop the consciousness and strategies to wield our privileges against the systems that secure them.

In that vein, being a scholar-activist isn’t enough if it only means the appropriation of the language of organizers to conflate academic theorizing with community work and movement-building. This argument comes from Gramsci and is particularly salient in spaces like ours at UVA. In “Race for Theory”(1987), Barbara Christian wrote about the nature of theory as an academic and more informal pattern-recognizing practice essential to survival. She exposed how the academicization of theory is used to de-legitimize Black literature and particularly Black women's literature. She argued for the return to a theorizing more organically rooted in our engagement with society. At best it’s a false flag and at worst it’s an intentional enforcement of white hegemony to engage in theorizing in a way that’s abstract and disconnected from the true imperative of theory - to inform our actions as (inherently political) beings. Our theory must serve. This kit is one piece of me trying to serve with theory.

In essence, I say it’s not anything to go to school and read critical race theory and just sit with it and say “I’m opting out of the “violent regime” (Cottom, 2019) of whiteness”. It’s not even enough to try to live as an antiracist individually. One must take that back home. It has to permeate the way you live and use your voice and participate in/disrupt social order. Otherwise, complicitness is the default.

And so I’m assembling this kit also for myself. It’s not just for my parents and my friends and the other white people in DSA and my conservative grandmother and my liberal grandmother. It’s for remembering and re-centering and continually learning. It may be used by other non-Black people, because the contours of anti-Black racism are unique in the US particularly, but I must recognize the limits of my personal identity as I build this kit; the resources I find resonant reflect my race, class status, and education level. In the future, I would like to provide some commentary on accessibility and rhetorical alterations that could be made to the “curriculum” of this kit. During initial consideration of this project, I tried to think about what the general progression from unawareness to anti-racist action would look like and I drew up a chart to help me select resources for each stage. I’ve condensed the steps from my chart into 3 general stages: Recognition, Re-orientation, and Resources/Reminders.

**Recognition -** *THICK* by Tressie McMillan Cottom and *How to be an Antiracist* by Ibram X. Kendi

I choose these books for the first section of the kit because they’re extremely modern (both published in 2019) and function as hard-hitting yet digestible primers on race in America. They engage and refute the idea that structural racism died with Jim Crow or the election of Barack Obama.

*THICK* is a mixture of personal narrative and ethnographic analysis that is both thorough and extremely accessible. Dr. Cottom’s particular rhetorical style yields arguments and observations which are tightly-woven, direct and serious, but also tangible and enjoyable to read. These are important considerations, because I’m trying to weigh the needs and natures of the audience I’m trying to engage. I cannot very effectively hand, for instance, my mom *How Capitalism Underdeveloped Black America,* but there’s just enough similarity in format between THICK and the David Sedaris essay collections she already reads that she could be convinced to pick it up and subsequently be able to digest it.

In the book’s introduction, Cottom elucidates upon the function of the personal essay as a “contested point of entry” for Black women to claim some space in public discourse. She writes “Speech becomes rhetoric … only when the one speaking can make a legitimate claim to some form of authority”(Cottom, 2019). Historically, Black women have been “categorically excluded”(ibid) from the groups to whom that authority is conferred and this has shaped what we’ve come to understand in ENWR 3500 as the Black Women’s rhetorical condition (Richardson via Carey, 2019): the state of being simultaneously desired (whether sexually or for labor) and devalued. As important as it is for a Black woman to recognize and maneuver around manifestations of the above, like controlling images (Hill-Collins, 2002) that speak in the minds of her audience before she can, it is important that white people become aware of these lies that live in our own heads and the very real violence they do when they’re allowed to inform our perceptions and actions.

Similarly, Dr. Cottom also exposes things about the nature of whiteness and social function of the concept of “beauty” which I personally feel just change the game completely. In her words, “Whiteness is a violent sociocultural regime legitimized by property to always make clear who is Black by fastidiously delineating who is officially white” and “beauty is the preferences that reproduce the existing social order”, so we may consider beauty as a kind of capital and so “as long as the beautiful people are white, what is beautiful at any time can be renegotiated … without redistributing capital”. One of the lines to which I particularly hope to draw kit-users attention is the following: “Indeed, any system of oppression must allow exceptions to validate itself as meritorious. How else will those who are oppressed by the system internalize their oppression?” Dr. Cottom goes on to discuss such topics as maternal mortality, status behaviors/symbols, and the importance of such things as twitter followership at revealing to whom attention is paid.

In *How to be an Antiracist*, Kendi strikes a more explicitly instructional tone. I consider this book a useful primer because it weaves commentary on current events like the 2016 election and reveals the pervasiveness of racism as a set of ideas created to justify the racial inequality that is a result of policies designed for the benefit of an elite few. In this book particularly, Kendi does a lot of defining terms, which I see as especially important for the needs of this kit’s audience. For instance, he introduces the idea of “positive discrimination” to mean policies like affirmative action which promote equality by countering existing oppressive dynamics. He also constructs a stark almost-dogmatic binary where all things are either racist or antiracist, which is really provocative - it doesn't let white people opt out from race and explicitly frames apathy as tantamount to complicity. Kendi’s engagement with assimilationist thinking (“Assimilationists typically position White people as the superior standard”) is particularly groundbreaking for white people like my parents, who grew up hearing the rhetoric of Reagan and Clinton and only understand “racist” to mean “segregationist”, while still holding assimilationist ideas and internalized notions of Black respectability.

This book is not immune to critique (as nothing should be) and therefore provides even further potential for discussion and growth. I take issue with Kendi’s line of argumentation against a power-based notion of who can be racist, because it seems to leave the door open for “reverse-racism” arguments and some women of color[[1]](#footnote-1) have contested that Kendi doesn’t treat the discussion of colorism with the appropriate nuance and deftness, but we can place this book in conversation with Dr. Cottom’s and begin to interrogate how Kendi’s gender may inform his perspective on societal ideas about beauty and desirability.

Overall, in this first section I hope to impart a critical awareness of whiteness, recognition of our participation in racist cultural regimes and assumptions, development of language to understand/begin discussing race, and some amount of desensitization - these authors don’t pull punches and there’s no room for “white fragility”. As Robin DiAngelo observed in her book by the same name, there is an idea of “whites as just human, and people of color as particular kinds (racialized) of humans”. This is part of what we’re trying to break in this first section.

**Re-orientation: Identity and Intersectionality**

I intend the second section to focus on establishing/building solidarity and identification across identities and struggles**.** We can easily see how our identities directly relate to the social power we hold, the way others perceive us by default, or the interests with which we align and the rhetoric of abolitionists and suffragists illustrates a tradition of constructing points of commonality among the interests of Americans of disparate identities. Rhetoric theory clarifies the necessity of establishing identification[[2]](#footnote-2) to effectively persuade (and it is persuasive/instructive work this kit tries to accomplish) an audience. Essentially, my goal in this section is for kit-users to realize the interconnection of their interests, and persuade them to struggle on behalf of another person/group in the collective interest.

Many of Audre Lorde’s writings theorize and define intersectionality and critique the lack of it in second-wave feminist movements, but for this kit I’ve selected **“There is No Hierarchy of Oppression”** for itssimultaneous brevity and weight. Lorde’s recognition of her multifaceted identity and the understanding it brings her can be read as follows:

I have learned that sexism (a belief in the inherent superiority of one sex over all others and thereby its right to dominance) and heterosexism (a belief in the inherent superiority of one pattern of loving over all others and thereby its right to dominance) both arise from the same source as racism-a belief in the inherent superiority of one race over all others and thereby its right to dominance.

This understanding of all oppressions as part of the same thing, as all participation in oppression of any group as also a wounding of the self is at the core of intersectionality and crucial establishing identification and building the kind of collective solidarity movement that is needed to change the paradigms our world rests upon.

Angela Davis remains one of the most well-known scholar-activists of our time and in the words of Cornel West, “in stark contrast to most leftists in the academy, her structural analysis and courageous praxis have come at a tremendous cost in her life and for her wellbeing” (2014). As much as I’d like to include every speech/essary she’s ever given, I’m including the more recent conversation/interview **“Freedom is a constant struggle”.** In the first chapter, Davis expresses succinctly her understanding of prison as part of an industrial complex rooted in slavery and capitalism. She continues to discuss the importance of “globalizing our thinking” and how the militarization of police which we saw and see in Gaza and Ferguson is part of the same thing:

… what I think is most interesting is the conceptualization of the intersectionality of struggles. Initially intersectionality was about bodies and experiences[[3]](#footnote-3). But now, how do we talk about bringing various social justice struggles together, across national borders? (…) we create a framework that allows us to think these issues together and to organize around these issues together (…) The major challenge of this period is to infuse a consciousness of the structural character of state violence into the movements that spontaneously arise. (pg. 27).

In conjunction with the intersectionality Lorde expressed, Davis says “... we cannot assume that it is possible to be victorious in any antiracist movement as long as we don’t consider how gender figures in, how gender and sexuality and class and nationality figure into those struggles” (2014). Again, the accessibility of diction here is a major consideration as I bring this piece into the kit. Davis’s language is elevated, but throughout these conversations with interviewer Frank Barat, she is patient, thoughtful, and clear with every argument, even though what she’s teasing out is by its very nature difficult and mired. In the second part of the book, she captures what I tried to express at the beginning of this portion of the paper: “ (discussing the anti-aparthied solidarity movement) they began to see that we have a common connection. If that’s not created, no matter how much you appeal to people, no matter how genuinely you invite them to join you, they will continue to see the activity as yours and not theirs”.

As much as we can understand something or help someone else understand something, there’s some things that a person just has to *feel.* Poems and **songs** have a fluidity in form and compactness which makes them uniquely poignant and accessible. Particularly as white people there are many experiences which we haven’t and won’t ever experience. Being an attuned listener to other’s lived experiences is thus important to understanding and emoting with them. As Lina Houston of if/when/how wrote “White folks, your identities of oppression are a window to, not a mirror of, the oppression people of color experience”. This is part of the holistic message I seek to impart in this section of the kit, so I include some **playlists** of music that deals with Blackness, Black womanhood, and wrangle with class and power and sex and sexuality, often at the same time. This is stuff we’ve probably heard on the radio or used in movie soundtracks, but it necessitates a deeper listen and some application of the frames of understanding we’re gaining.

**Resources/reminders:**

If the previous two sections were about theory, this one is about praxis. This one is about joining new communities and reshaping those to which you already belong. I offer some tools for continual learning and some reminders for kit-users.

**Twitter** is fast-paced, poorly regulated, and often awful, but it’s the best forum for public discourse that I’ve encountered and it’s not the worst place to be staying apprised with local, national, and international news, and listening/social learning from the perspectives of others *provided that your timeline is cultivated properly*. As media becomes increasingly unipolar, Twitter can provide valuable counterpoint and critique from those not privileged by the typical “legitimate platforms”. In the final essay of THICK, Dr. Cottom discusses the homogeneity of not only the New York Times editorial board, but their twitter feeds; writing “Twitter is easy … When it is free to do so with little risk to one’s reputation or worldview, some of our most well-known opinion writers employed by some of the most legitimate publications *do not have to engage with Black women in any real capacity* to retain their legitimacy”. To get kit-users started, I have provided a few initial follows and examples of things I’ve screenshotted from twitter recently.

**The WAIT** **acronym** stands for “Why am I talking?” and it’s used many places, but I first came to know it in the Bylaws for the Democratic Socialists of America: “Consider whether or not what you want to say has already been said, whether what you want to say is on topic or if there’s a better time and place to say it, and other methods for showing how you feel about the conversation (nodding your head, etc.)”(DSA, 2017). Don’t center yourself. This is where the ideas about discourse and power which we saw in the introduction to THICK are especially important: By default, white people are afforded authority and space within public discourse, while people of color continue to be marginalized and silenced. Shake off the white savior idea of being a “voice for the voiceless”. Think before you speak/act. Be vigilant of microaggressions (done by you or other white people) and open to criticism if someone should tell you about how your words or actions make them feel. Have spatial awareness: be cognizant of your identities and privileges and how even your presence in perhaps what’s a designated safe space centered around marginalized people can change the dynamic.

In a similar vein, I offer a **Google calendar** to keep track of meetings, town halls, and direct actions. This is both a practical tool for facilitating involvement in local community work and a symbolic reminder of the importance of showing up and physically providing support for the activism that people of color have been doing for decades. Part of antiracism is actively wielding privilege in service, not by being “voices for the voiceless” but by using our bodies as shields, setting comfort aside, and actively engaging as “co-conspirators” in the movement for Black lives and others like it. In my kit, I try to highlight some particular examples of issues and organizations with which an antiracist must become involved. Since I’m from Norfolk and live half my time in Charlottesville, these are particularly reflective of Virginia.

**Reflection**

With this kit, I hope to remind myself and help other white people recognize and name the ways that we participate, often by default, in the oppression of Black people and most especially Black women. Elaine Richardson’s concept of the **Black rhetorical condition** calls out how the dominant white perspective (on which our settler-colonist society is built and run) simultaneously desires and devalues Black people’s lives. The naming of this duality does two things: 1) it helps us understand the rhetorical moves that Black people do in order to survive and advocate for their liberation, and 2) it helps us understand how the default white perspective, shaped/informed by our latent-racist society, actively reproduces dehumanization.

Controlling images (Hill-Collins, 2002) are one manifestation projected onto the Black woman. Through her theorizing and rhetorical maneuvering, she recognizes and compensates-for/dismantles/turns-on-head the lies that are told about her before she opens her mouth. But, the controlling image was/is constructed by and for the benefit of the white man and is wielded by white women and sometimes Black men. In fact, the institutions in our society are designed to actively reproduce and instill these lies into each of our perspectives. I can go through my day at UVA and hear somebody invoke the idea of the “welfare mother” twice, uncritically and unironically. I can go home and hear my mother invoke it. With the language I’ve gained from ENWR 3500, I can call out what’s going on and talk with my mom about what really she’s participating in. When making this kit, I’ve had to really consider what types of resources can help a white person like my mom or myself come to recognize and correct our default-racism. I’ve also tried to then provide resources that offer replacement values or new ways of understanding the world to fill the mental place where the old lies used to be. Where used to live ideas about “inherent biological difference”(Kendi, 2019) or welfare mothers, I’m trying to offer intersectionality as a way of understanding the interactions of overlapping identities (race, gender, class, sexuality), examining our own lived experiences and identities, and incorporating this into a structural analysis that says “all forms of prejudice have the same root and to challenge only a single facet as if disconnected from the others is wholly ineffectual”. Then I’m trying to drive home both the global and local nature of the struggle. Angela Davis does this unlike anyone I’ve ever seen, so I look to her particularly for the global connections (Ferguson to Palestine, etc.). I close by offering some tools to help myself and other white people to listen and show up for communities of color and practice responsible involvement, not centering ourselves, as whiteness so often does. I hope that this kit can take some of the weight of “ambassadorship” off of Black women and aid in the forging of some new white co-conspirators because freedom is a constant struggle and it’s everybody’s business.

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1. [Afua Hirsch](https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/oct/11/how-to-be-an-antiracist-by-ibram-x-kendi-review) wrote for The Guardian [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Burke via Lundberg, 2018 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See Lorde [↑](#footnote-ref-3)