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IDEAS

A hole in the heart of antiracism training

Reducing people to caricatures and abstractions pushes us all further apart.

By **Chloé Valdary** Updated February 3, 2021, 12:23 p.m.



ADOBE

Editor's note: At the author's request, Ideas agreed to let this essay depart from the Globe's standard practice of capitalizing "Black" but not "white." She believes the practice is part of what she critiques here.

Everyone should want to be an antiracist. Who wouldn't want to stand against the evil

that declares that some people, because of the color of their skin, are inferior to others? Who wouldn't want to live in a society that honors the dignity and sacredness of every human being and that judges every one of us according to the content of our character?

The problem is that this isn't what some people mean when they call themselves antiracists. Instead, they talk about black people and white people as political abstractions. They seem to think racism can be solved by indulging in racial essentialism, which entails assuming things about the lived experiences of others based upon their skin color.

As the deaths of innocent black people at the hands of police have reminded us, assumptions can have fatal consequences. When it comes to antiracism training in schools and workplaces, assumptions rob us of the nuances of another person's lived experience.

What can you assume about me, for example, just by looking at me? I'm black. I'm a woman. I'm a millennial. But what else am I, beyond what that surface reveals? I am a descendant of slaves. I love reading and playing guitar and producing music and dancing to afrobeats. What else? I'm deeply suspicious of dogma, having been raised in it. I grew up in a religious, conservative home in New Orleans. The Christianity that was part of my upbringing rejected mainstream Christian holidays and tenets. Instead of celebrating Christmas and Easter, I spent those holidays learning about Emperor Constantine and empires of the past.

All of which made me, in adulthood, determined to break free of rigid orthodoxy and ideological thinking. So much so that I founded a company with the mission to teach people how to love themselves and also love people who appear, on the surface, to be nothing like them. My theory is that self-compassion leads to compassion for others. When we can truly approach another human with curiosity and generosity of spirit, it becomes a lot harder to be a bigot. This is why I believe that compassion is our best

weapon against racism and extremism.

I came to this realization in my senior year in college, when I took a class called “Anthropology of Magic, Religion, and Witchcraft.” My professor was an agnostic and a liberal, two identifiers I did not respect at the time. I made assumptions about her lived experience and put her in a box labeled “other.”

One day, that professor screened a documentary, “Jesus Camp,” which unfavorably portrayed an evangelical community. I did not recognize the people in the film. I did not worship in the way they did. Even so, I felt a greater kinship with those who practiced a spiritual devotion than with those who did not.

The next day in class, a fellow student, a professed atheist, railed against the community portrayed in the film. She called them “trash” and “worthless.” This made me feel small and insignificant, because the practice of spiritual devotion really mattered to me.

My professor’s response, however, would change my life.

To my astonishment, she remonstrated with the student. She explained that the purpose of the class was to investigate and find points of connection to all that makes us human, including our need for community, love, self-expression, and security. If we could not view fellow humans through that lens, if instead we dehumanized them and reduced folks who were different to something less-than, we would be doing them harm, and hurting ourselves in the process.

In other words, a person I had just judged, whose lived experiences I had made assumptions about, was speaking about the humanity of a community I thought she would reject.

That floored me. My professor’s open mind and heart forced me to confront the shallow frameworks I’d been using to size up others. It triggered a crisis of identity in

me that led to a deep sorrow and depression; I had to reevaluate all that I thought to be true, and then I had to let it go and grieve its loss. But that epiphany was also a spiritual awakening, a realization of the rich complexity of human beings. We cannot be sized up and fit into a box.

Black intellectual James Baldwin made a similar observation in his [debate](#) with conservative thinker William F. Buckley in 1965 at Cambridge University. Here is how he described Sheriff Jim Clark, who at the time was brutally and violently oppressing civil rights protesters and African American citizens in Selma, Ala.:

“You know, no one can be dismissed as a total monster. I’m sure he loves his wife, his children. I’m sure, you know, he likes to get drunk. You know after all, one’s got to assume he is visibly a man like me. But he doesn’t know what drives him to use the club, to menace with the gun and to use the cattle prod. Something awful must have happened to a human being to be able to put a cattle prod against a woman’s breasts, for example. What happens to the woman is ghastly. What happens to the man who does it is in some ways much, much worse.”

This observation is striking because the man that Baldwin casts as a tragic, pitiable figure is the racist who has material power. Baldwin’s moral analysis emphasizes a man’s inner life, which is immaterial and yet is the only force that allows us, if we so choose, to pursue good over evil; this inner life determines what we create and who we aspire to become.

Yet today our society seems obsessed with the outer state of our fellow humans. This comes at their expense but also at ours. If we claim that the sum of another is what constitutes that person materially — race, resources, physical power — what is it that we’re missing?

This surface-level thinking underpins racism. It reduces a man to his external features or circumstances, and in the words of Baldwin, represents “the denial of the human

being, his power, his beauty, his dread.” Even more presciently, Baldwin wrote that “white people in this country will have quite enough to do in learning how to accept and love themselves and each other, and when they have achieved this — which will not be tomorrow and may very well be never — the Negro problem will no longer exist, for it will no longer be needed.”

This is a psychological, spiritual assessment of human beings. To transform external, systemic structures that teem with racism, what is needed is for folks to see the whole human being with all of her complexities, idiosyncrasies, and intricacies.

If instead we reinforce a shallow dogma of racial essentialism by describing black and white people in generalizing ways, I fear we will mainly spread alienation that leads to insecurity, the stymieing of fellowship among peers of different races, and an atrophying of the spirit of brotherhood and sisterhood. A loveless wasteland provides fertile ground for racism to take root.

Breaking down tropes

Ibram X. Kendi, whose book “How to Be an Anti-Racist” has topped best-seller lists and who serves as the director of the Center for Antiracist Research at Boston University, [says](#) that “the heartbeat of racism is denial, and the heartbeat of antiracism is confession.”

Much of Kendi’s writing is about government policies that have perpetuated inequity and his proposals for reversing it. He says an antiracist action is “any measure that produces or sustains racial equity between racial groups,” while racist policy “produces racial inequity between groups.” One solution he proposes is a federal [Department of Antiracism](#) that “would be empowered with disciplinary tools to wield over and against policymakers and public officials who do not voluntarily change their racist policy and ideas.”

I don’t think that would be wise, but let’s set aside for now a debate over public policy.

Organizations around the country have brought Kendi in to give talks, and schools have added his work to classroom curricula, including in [Virginia](#), [California](#), [Chicago](#), and [Washington, D.C.](#) And I fear that in such settings, discussing race in broad strokes and calling for confession lay the groundwork for well-intentioned seekers of racial justice to pursue the opposite.

For one thing, the focus on racial groups implicitly asserts the existence of monolithic and stereotypical “white” and “black” Americas. Life is far more complex than this limited taxonomy would allow. In fact many Americans are black *and* white: There are few black descendants of slaves in the republic who are not also partially white. American culture itself is a blend of European, African, Asian, and Native American traditions.

Beyond that, in the words of the Pulitzer Prize-winning hip-hop artist Kendrick Lamar, we all have “power, poison, pain, and joy” inside us — regardless of our racial identity. We are all assailed by the fear of death, haunted by the specter of insignificance, and tempted by the possibility of attaining unfettered power. I also believe that we are all sacred, made in the image of the Divine, in need of love and belonging, and searching for a sense of worth and meaning. Understanding this is the first step toward building and renewing a truly antiracist, multiethnic country.

Ralph Ellison once wrote that “it is quite possible that much potential fiction by Negro Americans fails to achieve a vision of life . . . commensurate with the complexity of their actual situation. Too often they fear to leave the uneasy sanctuary of race to take their chances in the world of art.”

Ellison was demanding an end to an oppressive tendency to deal with human beings as caricatures. Unfortunately, businesses and school districts across the country are embracing diversity training in which [white attendees](#) are held responsible for the sins of their ancestors, and their lived experiences are prejudged (by extension, so too are those of their nonwhite colleagues). White attendees are told that they are fragile

— to use a word promulgated by another prominent diversity consultant, Robin DiAngelo — and that such fragility proves their racism. They are told that they must commit to becoming active antiracists and get with the retraining program: Admit you suffer from the sin of being white and seek penitence.

This relies on mental frameworks that are as limiting as those used by white supremacists against black people. Perhaps this is why some [studies suggest](#) that many diversity trainings fail and reinforce the very stereotyping they seek to undermine.

The worst thing a business or school can do is alienate its employees or students by treating people as political abstractions and making them feel insecure. Instead we ought to be asking ourselves how to create conditions that lead everyone to flourish. What is needed is an antiracism training rooted in a framework of abundance, not a framework of scarcity that puts white people into the reductive category of oppressor and black people into the equally reductive category of oppressed.

I believe the key to fostering spaces of diversity and inclusion is to teach people how to make peace with their human condition. This requires a spiritual practice that will help people wrestle with flaws, vulnerability, fear, mortality, and the infinite gifts that human beings bring to bear in the world. It means helping people think in terms of complexity instead of caricature. It means helping people develop a capacity for empathy and compassion for both themselves and their neighbors.

Such work requires more than a mandatory hour-long diversity and inclusion workshop. This is the work of the company I founded: ongoing training as coaching, rather than one-offs that help shield employers from liability for workplace discrimination. This also is, in essence, the work of restorative justice, which seeks to elevate human relationships. We can look to such practitioners of this philosophy as Father Gregory Boyle of [Homeboy Industries](#), in Los Angeles, which helps rehabilitate former gang members by giving them job skills, therapy, and a support

system. Similarly, the [Inside Circle Foundation](#) helps the incarcerated heal and build lives of service from inside prison.

Black jazz critic and essayist [Albert Murray](#) called this “impromptu heroism culture”: a process by which human beings confront and contend with “the infernal absurdities and ever-impending frustrations inherent in the nature of all existence” and build their resilience. He thought of jazz and the blues as examples of this skill in action.

This is also what the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. described when he talked about the “[beloved community](#).” The end of the process is “reconciliation,” which “transforms opponents into friends” and may bring about “the salvation of our civilization.” Doing this kind of work will help create conditions that organically lead to diversity and inclusion, because it will foster interdependence, collaboration, and belonging — and it would do that without presuming things about people because of their skin color.

Chloé Valdary is a writer and entrepreneur who founded Theory of Enchantment, a consultancy that teaches self-compassion as a first step to ending racism.

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