

RACISM AND ANTIRACISM IN NONFICTION FOR THE MIDDLE GRADES

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The Common Core State Standards' focus on nonfiction texts has prompted middle schools to include more historical nonfiction, including books that focus on the United States' racialized past (and present) such as *We Are Not Yet Equal* by Carol Anderson (2018) and *Stamped: Racism, Antiracism and You* (2020) by Jason Reynolds and Ibram X. Kendi. But books for youth about racism have been shrouded in controversy, anti-critical race theory legislation, and calls for censorship, suggesting that we need a better understanding of the books' content. Thus, the purpose of this study was to use content analysis to examine messages about racism and antiracism in *We Are Not Yet Equal* and *Stamped*. Findings indicated the texts suggest racism takes numerous forms, and it is foundational and persistent throughout the United States' past and present, manifesting as scientific racism, institutional racism, racist violence, representational racism, and racist language.

Keywords: historical nonfiction, critical race theory, racism, antiracism, young adult literature

The number of nonfiction texts for youth that focus on the United States' racialized past (and present) has increased over the last 5 years. Some of these texts such as *We Are Not Yet Equal* (Anderson, 2018) and *Stamped: Racism, Antiracism and You* (Reynolds & Kendi, 2020) were adapted for middle grades readers from scholarly texts written for an adult audience (i.e., *White Rage* [Anderson, 2016] and *Stamped From the Beginning* [Kendi, 2016], respectively). Middle grades researchers and scholars have noted the unique focus of middle schools,

which include understanding the importance of middle grades students' developmental levels when selecting materials and designing instruction that is relevant, challenging, and interdisciplinary (Bishop & Harrison, 2021; Ellerbrock et al., 2018; Hinton, 2022; Mizell, 2022). In fact, Kendi explicitly cited middle school students as the audience of his text for youth, "I want [young readers] to have a clear-eyed sense of what the problem [of racism] is. There are so many people whose journey doesn't even begin until they get to college. Let's arm them intellectually,

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beginning in middle school” (Corbett, 2020, p. 12). But books for youth about racism have been shrouded in controversy, anti-critical race theory (CRT) legislation, and calls for censorship (Harrison et al., 2021; Kaplan & Owings, 2021; Teitelbaum, 2022; Wineburg, 2021), suggesting that we need a better understanding of the books’ content.¹

Novelist and critic, Toni Morrison (1992) noted long ago that “silence and evasion” about race has “historically ruled literary discourse” (p. 9) and that “the act of enforcing racelessness in literary discourse is itself a racial act” (p. 46). Morrison also acknowledged the persistence of colorblindness when she maintained that silence about race is “complicated by the fact that the habit of ignoring race is understood to be a graceful, even generous, liberal gesture” (pp. 9–10). Today’s debates have suggested that we should be generous to children and avoid discussing race and racism. Opponents of teaching about racism appeared to define it as prejudice expressed by an individual. This view has been demonstrated by their claims that white youth are being blamed for racism and that their feelings should be protected.² Bernstein (2011) maintained white conceptions of childhood exclude Black children and seek to manufacture white children as “innocent,” “angelic,” and deserving of protection (p. 33). In their effort to shield white youth, critics suggested that they are innocent and vulnerable and need to be defended from lessons about the pernicious hold racism has on the nation. Some Black literature for youth has slowly been incorporated into school curriculum, but the history of Black people’s experiences with race and racism in the United States remains largely outside of school-sanctioned texts (Eargle, 2016; Howard, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 2003; Tyson, 2003). When historical texts about Black experiences with race and racism have been included in school curriculum, inaccurate depictions flourish (Brown & Brown, 2010; McBean & Feinberg, 2020; Yosso, 2002). Researchers reported that while discussions

about race and racism are challenging, teachers have sought ways to engage students in productive conversations about such topics (Flynn, 2012; Reisman et al., 2020; Thomas, 2015).

This study, which used qualitative content analysis, emerged from an interest in the recent response to texts about racism in the United States and a belief that it is important to consider how educators might use texts to help students better understand what racism is and how it is a pervasive part of the nation’s past and present, especially because it is difficult to avoid such topics when including texts about U.S. history in social studies and language arts. Studies that examined race and racism in fiction (e.g., Brooks & Hampton, 2005) and textbooks (e.g., Brown & Brown, 2010) for youth are numerous, but there is a need to also explore racism in nonfiction trade books for middle grades readers. To consider how we might teach nonfiction about racism, we must first garner a better understanding of what such texts might contain. The focus of my analysis centered on messages about racism and anti-racism communicated in *We Are Not Yet Equal: Understanding Our Racial Divide* (Anderson, 2018) and *Stamped: Racism, Anti-racism and You: A Remix of the National Book Award-Winning Stamped From the Beginning* (Reynolds & Kendi, 2020). The following research questions guided my analysis:

1. What can middle school students learn about racism in the United States through reading these texts?
2. What messages or lessons about anti-racism are communicated in these titles?

In this article, I report primarily on findings for the first research question and briefly summarized the findings from the second question because of page limitations. I begin by discussing key terms and my theoretical framework. Next, I describe my methods and findings, and I conclude with implications for classroom use.

DEFINING RACISM AND ANTIRACISM

There are multiple (and multilayered) definitions of racism and antiracism. Racism, as connected to colonialism, slavery, and contemporary society, is but one form of oppression out of many, and most describe it as acquiring and retaining power or dominance (e.g., Anthias & Lloyd, 2001; Berman & Paradies, 2010; Doane, 2017; Essed, 1991; Tatum, 1997). Some scholars, such as Wilson (2005) in his study of race and racism in literature, described racism as either overt or institutional. Wilson (2005) said overt racism is based on stereotypes, cited slavery in the United States as an example, and said it operates at the “personal level ... whereby one individual hates another individual because of his or her racial origins or a group of individuals despises another group simply because of who they are” (p. xi). While individuals’ personal thoughts, ideas, and beliefs contribute to and express racism, racism is about white supremacy, and as Essed (1991) noted, “The term individual racism is a contradiction in itself because racism is by definition the expression or activation of group power” (p. 37). Racism has been about preserving white people’s collective power and privileges while exerting superiority.

Wilson (2005) concluded, “One could, in fact, suggest that historically, overt racism and institutional racism were one in the same” (p. xii). To Wilson, institutional racism is more “contemporary,” “subtle,” “obscure,” and it “exists in the very structure of the corporate entity” (p. xii). Expressions of racism are indeed fluid or evolving (Bonilla-Silva, 2021; Doane, 2017).

Bonilla-Silva (2021), for example, has written extensively about what he calls new racism or colorblind racism, which contains “practices that are subtle, institutional, and apparently nonracial” (p. 3). Bonilla-Silva maintained:

Whereas Jim Crow racism explained Blacks’ social standing as the result of their biological and moral inferiority, color-blind racism avoids such facile arguments. Instead, Whites rationalize minorities’ contemporary status as the product of market dynamics, naturally occurring phenomena, and Blacks’ imputed cultural limitation. (p. 2)

Bonilla-Silva argued that racism concerns beliefs and actions that produce a racial hierarchy and “shapes the life chances of the various races. This structure is responsible for the production and reproduction of systemic racial advantages for some (the dominant racial group) and disadvantages for others (the subordinated races)” (p. 21).

Because it is embedded in systems, racism can manifest in discourse and media, as Essed (1991) made clear in her definition of racial discrimination stating “[it] includes all acts—verbal, nonverbal, and paraverbal—with intended or unintended negative or unfavorable consequences for racially or ethnically dominated groups” (p. 45). As noted by Henry and Tator (2002), “Media representations are discursive formations that are part of our everyday culture.... Their discourses have enormous power not only to represent social groups but also to identify, regulate, and even construct social groups” (p. 27). Mass media and “other systems of cultural production and representation” transmit messages about and pictures of minoritized people that might seem innocuous and unassuming but actually “play a critical role in controlling the access of those marginalized groups to cultural, social, economic, and political power” (Henry & Tator, 2002, p. 27).

Similar to racism, antiracist and antiracism are terms that have had multiple, complex meanings. The use of (and interest in) these concepts increased after George Floyd was murdered in May 2020 (Perry et al., 2021). Perry et al. (2021), based on their “nationally representative survey data collected near the height of interest in ‘anti-racist/antiracist’ terminology (August 2020),” found “that Blacks and Hispanics are significantly less likely than

whites to identify as ‘anti-racist’ and that only those who identify as ‘very liberal’ are significantly more likely to identify with the term compared with others across the political spectrum” (p. 1). I have similarly noted elsewhere that the target audience for antiracist literature is white people (Hinton, 2022). Perry et al. (2021) reason that people of color may be less apt to describe themselves as antiracist because fighting racism is germane to their daily existence wherein white people have the privilege of denying or ignoring racism.

While Bonnett (2000) defined antiracism as “forms of thought and/or practice that seek to confront, eradicate and/ or ameliorate racism” (p. 4), Perry et al. (2021) associated antiracism with “progressive racial attitudes” and a stance against colorblindness (p. 2). Bonilla-Silva (2021) maintained that antiracism requires “understanding the institutional nature of racial matters,” acknowledging that all are “affected materially (receive benefits or disadvantages) and ideologically by the racial structure,” taking “responsibility for your unwilling participation,” and working toward “the goal of achieving real racial equality” (p. 16).

Taken together, definitions of racism and antiracism are plentiful and have varied over the years. Racism is about power and supremacy, and it is embedded throughout the structure of society while antiracism, which seeks to acknowledge, confront, and oppose racism, has also been constant in the nation.

Theoretical Framework

Notions of CRT and the selective tradition ground the analysis. Current efforts in the United States to censor books about past and contemporary racism in the country are not new. Historically, keeping the history of Black people’s experiences with race and racism in the United States outside of school-sanctioned curricula has been a priority. What might be novel is that targeting books about racism today occurs under the guise of concerns about teaching CRT, an analytical framework that is beneficial for discerning how racism is

ingrained in U.S. institutions, including schools, and how certain policies and practices benefit whites and penalize other racial groups (Bell, 1992; Delgado & Stefanic, 2017; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). CRT also critiques notions of liberalism, particularly colorblindness and meritocracy, as they ignore institutional racism.

Institutional racism can occur in text and curriculum selection (Blakeney, 2005; Yosso, 2002), so despite the current hostility toward CRT, the framework is best at helping clarify how racism is present in the nonfiction books. For example, Yosso (2002) used CRT to illustrate how traditional school curricula are made up of “structures, processes, and discourses” that maintain whiteness and limit what knowledge is taught (p. 94). Yosso also called for a critical race curriculum that centralizes the knowledge, history, and experiences of people of color and that is designed to develop critical consciousness, social justice and action, and antiracism. Similarly, according to children’s literature scholar Harris (1989), there has been a selective tradition of children’s literature in which whiteness is normative (p. 192). Williams (1977) defined the selective tradition as “an intentionally selective version of a shaping past and a preshaped present, which is then powerfully operative in the process of social and cultural definition and identification” (p. 115). Leaning on Williams’s concept of the selective tradition, Taxel (1984) examined children’s historical fiction about the American Revolution and asserted curricula reflect a selective tradition designed to “demonstrate the norms, values, culture, and history of the dominant social classes” and that “schooling plays an important role in legitimating and reproducing the existing, unequal social order” (pp. 8–9). Authors of Black American children’s literature have opposed this tradition and have sought to offer children’s literature that portrays Black people’s experiences in authentic ways (Bishop, 2007; Harris, 1989; Johnson, 1990). The selective tradition and CRT are useful for understanding how racism

influences school curricula and is rooted in institutions and policies.

METHODS

In this section, I describe my selection of two texts. Then, I explain the use of qualitative content analysis for these two texts.

Text Selection

Over the years, I have read books published for youth about racism and watched as the number increased after the murder of George Floyd. I grew particularly interested in texts aimed at middle grades readers and selected two, *We Are Not Yet Equal* and *Stamped: Racism, Antiracism and You*, that were published before Floyd's death and in the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement, founded by Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi, when it was abundantly clear that claims of a postracial society were patently false.³ I also selected both texts (see Appendix for text summaries) because they are by Black writers, are cowritten with authors who specialize in writing for young readers, and oppose the selective tradition.⁴

Data Analysis

In this study, I used an inductive approach to qualitative content analysis to analyze the two historical nonfiction books. I opted for an inductive analysis because it uses codes derived from the data (Berg, 2007; Cho & Lee, 2014; Elo & Kyngas, 2008). Researchers often use content analysis to study children's literature (Beach et al., 2009; Watkins & Liang, 2014), as it "can reveal the more subtle messages embedded in a text" (Hoffman et al., 2011, p. 28). Before I commenced with employing inductive content analysis, I reviewed the literature and operationalized definitions for racism and antiracism. I considered a description of racism drawing from Wilson (2005) and Bonilla-Silva (2021) for the

study: Racism is overt, entrenched in notions of white superiority, and it is institutional, manifesting in systems, actions, or practices that threaten people's life chances because of their race. Bonnett's (2000) description of antiracism was also used: beliefs and actions designed to oppose and/or end racism. Thus, the definition of racism I used focused on institutional racism, laws, policies, practices, and ideologies that impact Black people's lives, while I defined antiracism as efforts to impede or abolish racism.

As is common with inductive content analysis, I took a multiphase approach to analysis. First, I read the two books to get a sense of what they were about and how the authors organized them. Next, I employed open coding. I reread the books, generated notes about content, and marked significant passages, focusing fully on instances when the authors mentioned racism or antiracism directly or it was suggested. I entered each passage into a table for analysis. Some of the open codes included presidential slaveholders, racism & science, racialized policies, white allies, state laws, and progressive white people. After I reread each text a third time, I sought to examine the codes more carefully for patterns by following Attride-Stirling's (2001) call for using handwritten weblike diagrams to analyze further, which helped to revise categories and develop subcategories.

To maintain trustworthiness in the study, I used three methods. The first was prolonged engagement (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) with the texts which allowed me to consider how racism and antiracism manifest in the texts while I examined research about racism and antiracism. Second, I followed other researchers (Cho & Lee, 2014; Elo & Kyngas, 2008; Taylor, 2003) who argued using rich descriptions of the books and substantial quotations to support the findings help readers discern whether the researcher has sufficiently determined categories. Finally, I kept detailed memos while reading each book, noting the codes I identified, and the passages associated with them.

FINDINGS

Findings revealed that these texts are in opposition to the selective tradition, as they mostly center Black people's experiences with racism and align with critical race theorists' argument that racism is ever-present in the United States. The most notable message found in *We Are Not Yet Equal* and *Stamped: Racism, Antiracism and You* is that racism takes numerous forms, and it is foundational and persistent throughout the United States' past and present. Opponents of CRT said it categorizes Black people as powerless victims, but these books illustrated how Black people fought oppression.

Next, I discuss several noteworthy manifestations of racism found in the texts that indicate how racism has impacted (and continues to influence) life in the United States: scientific racism, institutional racism, racist violence, representational racism, and racist language. Some codes overlap. For example, racist violence and language are apparent in institutional racism.

Scientific Racism

Scientific racism was one of the five prominent categories, and it encompassed instances when science has been used to justify racism. In *Stamped*, readers learned about "polygenesis," a theory Lucilio Vanini, an Italian philosopher, subscribed to instead of the more traditional creation story from the Bible, monogenism. According to Vanini, "Africans were born of a 'different Adam,' and had a different creation story" (Reynolds & Kendi, 2020, p. 22). Reynolds and Kendi stressed that this idea dehumanized Africans:

It was kind of like saying (or to him, *proving*) that Africans weren't actually human. Like they were maybe animals, or monsters, or aliens, but not human—at least not like Whites—and therefore didn't have to be treated as such. (pp. 22–23)

The authors went on to explain that in 1839 polygenesis became "backed by 'science'" when Samuel Morton, a revered anthropologist, began "measuring the skulls of humans (gross) and determined that White people had bigger skulls and therefore greater intellectual capacity" (p. 91). While Morton's findings were embraced by many, Reynolds and Kendi concluded these tactics reveal how scholars would do "Anything to justify supremacy and slavery" (p. 92).

Eugenicists, whom Reynolds and Kendi (2020) defined as "people who believed you could control the 'quality' of human beings by keeping undesirable genetics out, meaning the genetics of Black people," (p. 141) joined the effort to depict people of African descent as inferior. "There were new versions of the racial hierarchy, which weren't that new because Black people still existed at the bottom, but the argument was that the more White (Nordic) blood people had, the better they would be, intellectually" (p. 141), explained Reynolds and Kendi. When interracial couples reproduced and their offspring did well, scholars attributed their success to their white heritage: "They [scientists] were arguing what they'd been arguing—that Black people were born to be less-than, and that mixing with Whites gave them a leg up because they then weren't 'all the way' Black" (p. 141). Reynolds and Kendi connected this line of thinking about false claims of Black inferiority to IQ tests and other exams that supposedly measure intelligence: "This would tie in with the creation of IQ tests and standardized tests, all skewed to justify the dumb Black, and the ones that did well *must've* had some White in them. Yada yada yada" (p. 141).

By the 1990s, Reynolds and Kendi (2020) posited, "What scholars were arguing is that intelligence is so relative, it's impossible to actually measure fairly and without bias. Uh-oh. This notion virtually shook the foundations of the racist ideas that Black people were less intelligent than White people" (p. 219). They maintained that the authors of *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American*

Life “wouldn’t stand for this kind of talk [that testing contain biases]. No, no, no. So they wrote a book refuting it all ... [that] argued ... standardized testing was real and valid and, most important, fair” (p. 220). Reynolds and Kendi summed up *The Bell Curve*’s premise: “Black people, who were disproportionately doing poorly on these tests, were intellectually inferior due to genetics or environment” (p. 220). Reynolds and Kendi also stressed tactics used to conclude white people are superior despite evidence to the contrary have been persistent: “Scientific evidence that the races are 99.9 percent the same was brought forth on June 26, 2000. The year 2000 was when people were given scientific evidence that human beings were the same, despite the color of their skin” (p. 227). Reynolds and Kendi quipped, “Isn’t that wild? Bill Clinton delivered the news as if it were news” (p. 227), nodding toward Hill’s (2008) observation that researchers:

have agreed for at least 30 years that the folk theory [e.g., race is biological/genetic rather than a social construct, as CRT theorists posit] of race has no scientific foundation, this consensus is repeatedly presented in the mass media as if it were astonishing breaking news. (p. 10)

Reynolds and Kendi surmised that folk theories prevail despite scientific evidence and an announcement from the President of the United States:

But there was 0.1% still out there. And that 0.1% difference between humans *must* be racial. Whether it is or isn’t, it was going to be exploited by racist scientists who did everything they could to provide evidence that the races were biologically different. First curse theory and polygenesis, and now genes—racists were relentless. (p. 228)

Reynolds and Kendi clarified origins, consequences, purposes, and continuations of scientific racism.

Institutional Racism

The category of scientific racism focused on the ways in which scholars use theories and scientific studies to justify racism and claim white superiority. Scientific racism has been a significant manifestation of racism because many observations and findings supposedly grounded in science continue to contribute to racism today. A second category involved how racism is demonstrated throughout both texts as institutional, as CRT theorists have pointed out. Institutional racism here consists of two subcategories: slavery and governmental laws, policies, and practices.

Slavery

Slavery, deeply intertwined in capitalism, has been considered the institution that established racism in the United States. As CRT scholar Guinier (2004) reminded, “for roughly 50 of our country’s first 72 years, the presidency was won by Southern slave owners” (p. 98). Reynolds and Kendi (2020) explained that slavery “was common” during the 1400s in Europe, but it became racialized with the help of Prince Henry of Portugal’s biographer Gomes Eanes de Zurara:

slaves, equaling money, money, money, though it was always framed as a noble cause, thanks to Zurara.... So, what makes him the world’s first racist? Well, Zurara was the first person to *write* about and *defend* Black human ownership, and this single document began the recorded history of anti-Black racist ideas. (p. 7)

Reynolds and Kendi argued that by the time the first 20 enslaved people arrived in Jamestown, Virginia in 1619, Zurara’s ideas about Africans benefiting from slavery had circulated:

Zurara’s documentation of the racist idea that Africans needed slavery in order to be fed and taught Jesus, and that it was all ordained by God, began to seep in and stick to the European cultural psyche. And a few hun-

dred years later, this idea would eventually reach America. (pp. 8–9)

Religion and slavery were firmly intertwined according to Reynolds and Kendi (2020), who pointed out that John Cotton and Richard Mather (and later Cotton Mather), theologians invested in Aristotle's insistence on "human hierarchy," applied Aristotle's beliefs to religion, proclaiming Puritan superiority: "According to the Puritans, they were better than: 1. Native Americans. 2. Anglican (English) people who weren't Puritans. 3. Everyone else who wasn't a Puritan. 4. Especially African people" (pp. 16–17). Cotton Mather also believed the purpose of slavery was to convert slaves to Christianity and tried "to convince people that ... the only mission of slavery, had to be to save the souls of the slaves, because through that salvation the enslaved would in turn be whitened. *Purified*" (p. 35). Ideas concerning religion's role in "civilizing" the enslaved justified racism and the institution of slavery (p. 23).

Anderson begins their book with quotes from presidents who held people in bondage, but admitted slavery is, as James Madison put it, the country's "original sin" that must be atoned for: "The horrors of chattel slavery would bring down a wrath of biblical proportions, prophesied another founder, Thomas Jefferson, principal author of the Declaration of Independence ... this third US president was a slaveholder" (p. 1). She also stated that "Abraham Lincoln agonized that the war's carnage was God's punishment for 'all the wealth piled by the bondsman's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil'" (p. 2). Anderson (2018) told readers:

Millions upon millions of enslaved people had built the enormous wealth of the United States. During those nearly 250 years of unpaid toil, they had endured rape, whippings, murder, the dismemberment of families, and forced subjugation, illiteracy, and abject poverty. (p. 8)

Anderson asserted that after the Civil War, the country could have chosen to end racism and accept Black people as equal citizens: "when the Confederacy began its surrender on April 9, 1865. America was now at the crossroads between its slaveholding past and the possibility of a truly inclusive, vibrant democracy" (p. 3). Both books explained that this did not happen, and racism persisted. Thus, these authors clearly conveyed the institution of slavery was the genesis and durable conduit that fuels institutional racism today.

Governmental Laws, Policies, and Practices

Governmental laws, policies, and practices focused on all levels (i.e., federal, state, and local) and branches of government and includes law enforcement and court decisions in the United States from the country's founding to the present. Some laws, policies, and practices were explicitly racist. Reynolds and Kendi (2020), for example, enumerated the racist laws and policies put in place to dehumanize Africans, maintain slavery, prevent white and Black people from interacting in ways that served their mutual interests, and hamper slave revolts: "So, in order to keep their human property from rising up, slaveholders and politicians created a *new* unnatural system. A new set of racist codes" (p. 34). The codes the authors of *Stamped* listed range from preventing interracial relationships, barring Black citizens from politics and property ownership, and dehumanizing Black and Native American people to giving white indentured servants property at the end of their service. Reynolds and Kendi also pointed out that during Andrew Johnson's presidency, "Black codes—social codes used to stop Black people from living freely—were created" (p. 108). Anderson (2018) went in-depth and explained how Black Codes impacted Black people's freedom in ways that were similar to enslavement:

Black people couldn't hold any other employment besides laborer or domestic (unless they had the written consent of the mayor or judge). They were also banned from hunting and fishing, and thus denied the means even to stave off hunger. More galling yet was a provision whereby black children who had been sold before the war and hadn't yet reunited with their parents were to be apprenticed off. Their former masters had the first right to their labor. (pp. 23–24)

The fear of losing capital and power often prompted racist laws. For instance, the Three-Fifths Compromise was an early example described by Reynolds and Kendi:

The South wanted to play both sides of the fence. On one hand, they didn't want to count slaves as people, but instead wanted to count them as property, because the greater the population, the more taxes you have to pay. *But*, on the other hand, they needed more population, because the greater the population, the more representation they got, and with more representation came more power. And the North was like, "NOOOOPE! Slaves can't be human," because the North didn't have (as many) slaves and therefore couldn't risk letting the South have more power. So, the compromise was to create a fraction. Every five slaves equaled three humans. (p. 60)

While the government put the Three-Fifths Compromise in place to maintain capital and power, both Jefferson and Lincoln sought out a racist policy (i.e., colonization) they hoped would protect white people. Reynolds and Kendi posited that after Gabriel and Nancy Prosser's attempted revolt in Virginia, fear increased "So, up from the soil of slavery sprouted new racist ideas to protect White lives. Sending slaves 'back' to Africa and the Caribbean—Thomas Jefferson's idea of colonization—was one of them" (p. 70). Reynolds and Kendi noted that others supported the idea of resettlement and established organizations devoted to the cause (p. 71).

Anderson (2018) put policies and lawmaker's initiatives related to colonization this

way: "Before Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, he had plotted to rid the nation of as many of the nearly half million free black people as possible" (p. 6). Anderson maintained that Lincoln was influenced by "Thomas Jefferson, who had advocated the expulsion of blacks from the United States in order to save the nation" (p. 6). Anderson also said, "Kentucky slaveholder and statesman Henry Clay" influenced Lincoln and described how in "1816 Clay cofounded the American Colonization Society to encourage free blacks to leave the nation. Clay's society oversaw the resettlement of thousands in what is now Liberia, West Africa" (p. 6). According to Anderson, Lincoln blamed Black people for the Civil War and asked Black leaders to convince them to leave the country: "In August 1862, Lincoln summoned five of DC's black leaders to the White House. He told them it was their duty to accept immigration to South America given what their people had done" (pp. 6–7). Anderson pointed out that Lincoln conveniently omitted that Africans were brought to the country against their will and suggested that instead "His framing of the issue absolved slaveholders and their political allies of responsibility for catapulting the nation into a civil war. It also signaled the power of racism over patriotism" (p. 7).

Jim Crow laws, which Reynolds and Kendi (2020) defined as "laws that legalized racial segregation," (p. 108) were also overtly racist. Anderson (2018) explained that the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* court decision "ushered in government-sanctioned racial segregation" and described how "Jim Crow dominated the lives of black people in America from 1890 well into the twentieth century. From conception to coffin, there was no nook or cranny of a black person's life that it did not touch" (p. 89). Racism was embedded in court cases, access to voting, and employment and housing policies. Reynolds and Kendi discussed "white flight," white homeowners' response to *Shelley v. Kraemer*, a 1948 Supreme Court ruling arguing "that the courts could not enforce Whites-only real estate contracts in northern

cities to keep out migrants and stop housing desegregation” (p. 158). However, the ruling did not prevent tactics designed to limit Black peoples’ freedom to choose where they reside. Anderson described housing segregation in 1920s Detroit spurred by redlining and restrictive covenants:

Realtors, insurance agents, banks, and landlords devised a witches’ brew of schemes to keep blacks hemmed in. Whites engaged in redlining (the denial of mortgages and other financial services). There were also restrictive covenants (agreements by property owners not to sell or rent to certain people). (pp. 74–75)

Black people resisted and sought to integrate neighborhoods, vote, and seek good jobs despite violence and harassment.

Racism also managed to surface around helpful laws and policies. In these instances, laws and policies that could have benefited Black Americans were interpreted, implemented, or evaded in ways that made them have a racist effect or impact. For instance, Reynolds and Kendi (2020) explained that in 1807, during Jefferson’s presidency, he:

brought about a new Slave Trade Act. The goal was to stop the import of people from Africa and the Caribbean into America, and fine illegal slave traders. (*Yes!*) Instead, the act turned out to be paper thin and did nothing to stop domestic slavery or the international slave trade. (*No!*) (p. 72)

They went on to say that after signing the Transatlantic Slave Trade Act, Jefferson started “‘breeding’ slaves. (*No!*) He and other like-minded slave owners began forcing their men and women slaves to conceive children so that they, the owners, could keep up with all the farming demands of the Deep South” (p. 72).

Civil rights legislation such as the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments had the potential to make a difference, but both books stress that lawmakers and judges interpreted the amendments in ways that invali-

dated them. Concerning the amendments, Anderson (2018) stated:

The U.S. Supreme Court justices gave the aura of being “strict constitutionalists,” that is, jurists who did not interpret or create but merely distinguished between the rights the federal government enforced and those controlled by the states. But the supposedly legally neutral interpretations had profound effects. (pp. 49–50)

In time, “The court declared that the Reconstruction amendments—the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth—had illegally placed the full scope of civil rights, which had once been so strictly the domain of states, under federal authority” (p. 50), Anderson reported. Reynolds and Kendi (2020) put it this way, “But the thing about this [Fifteenth] amendment (as well as the Thirteenth and Fourteenth) was that there were loopholes. Racist loopholes. *Potholes*” (p. 110).

Racism also manifested in potentially helpful laws, policies, and Supreme Court rulings related to education. The 1954 Supreme Court ruling, *Brown v. Board of Education*, should have given all Black children access to good schools. Instead, lawmakers used methods to prevent *Brown* from being implemented. Anderson (2018) explained:

The game plan of *stall and defy* was now in place. Southern states used and abused the legal process to pass one unconstitutional law after the next [and]... all the motions, hearings, affidavits, rulings, and appeals kept *Brown* at bay. (p. 108)

Anderson added, “Proud of the consequences [of using legislation to stall *Brown*], one man bragged, ‘As long as we can legislate, we can segregate’” (p. 108).

The authors of both texts stressed there were modern executive orders and policies that had a disastrous impact on Black communities such as stop and frisk, the war on drugs and the “three strikes and you’re out” law, which Reynolds and Kendi (2020) labeled as “basi-

cally, a new slavery” (p. 217). Concerning the war on drugs, Anderson (2018) noted:

Reagan dragged America down the road of mass incarceration [and] as the horrific toll crack cocaine took on lives became more and more obvious, the administration’s response was not to fund treatment facilities but to demonize and criminalize black people and provide the federal resources to make incarceration the norm. (pp. 185–186)

CRT theorists argued the law can be complicit in maintaining racism (Bell, 1992). Both texts conveyed there were blatantly racist laws, and that helpful civil rights legislation was developed, but presidents, judges, and lawmakers found ways to weaken, stall, and/or obstruct implementation.

Racist Violence

In addition to racism manifesting in science and institutions, the authors cited numerous examples of racial violence throughout the country’s existence. Violence took the form of riots, lynching, rape, and police brutality. When discussing the New York City draft riots in 1863, Anderson (2018) captured the essence of the use of violence: “This violence was simply the most overt, virulent expression of a stream of anti-black sentiment that constricted the lives of both the free and the enslaved” (p. 9). Violence was often used in response to laws that might offer Black people an opportunity to exercise their rights as citizens, such as Reconstruction era laws. Anderson wrote that during “the summer of 1865, at President Johnson’s bequest, Union general Carl Schurz” went to the Deep South to find out how the states were responding to Johnson’s proclamation to abolish slavery and ratify the Thirteenth Amendment (p. 19). Reportedly, Schurz discovered that “black women ... had been ‘scalped,’ had their ‘ears cut off,’ or had been thrown into a river and drowned amid chants for them to swim to the ‘damned Yankees.’” Black boys and men were routinely stabbed, clubbed, and shot. Some were even

“chained to a tree and burned to death” (p. 20). The violence continued in response to amendments, voting rights, and access to jobs.

When Black southerners decided to migrate for better jobs and fewer encounters with racism, violence and other tactics were used to stall the Great Migration (Anderson, 2018). Anderson also defined “whitecapping,” a practice in which “local whites maimed, murdered, and terrorized blacks and, as the persecuted fled, seized all the land until one could ‘ride for miles and not see a black face’” (p. 63). The authors of both texts also mentioned the violence of the summer of 1919, which Reynolds and Kendi (2020) described as a response to the fact that “The normal racist ideas weren’t working on Black people, so racists had to go above and beyond. The summer of 1919 was the bloodiest summer since Reconstruction. So much so, it was named Red Summer” (p. 143). In *Stamped*, they also commented on the violence during Obama’s years in office that sparked the Black Lives Matter movement: “People started to die. People continued to die. Children’s lives, ended at the hands of police officers and vigilantes who placed no value on Black humanity. Police officers and vigilantes who walk free” (p. 242). Both texts illustrated how violence has been used throughout the nation’s history to invoke fear and maintain racism.

Representational Racism

The texts also indicated that racism takes the form of representations of Black people in media, including popular books, movies, and newspapers. Essed (1991) explained that oppressions such as racism are “coordinated ideologically through socialization and the constant actualization, through the media and other channels of communication, of images, opinions, and versions of reality legitimizing the status quo” (p. 51). Reynolds and Kendi (2020) concurred and argued popular books and movies were often used to telegraph messages about white superiority. For instance, when Black people felt triumphant because

Jack Johnson, the heavyweight boxing champ, was able to exert a modicum of power “they [white people] figured out a way to get rid of Jack Johnson.... But the end of Jack Johnson still wasn’t enough to make White men feel good about themselves”; as a result, *Tarzan of the Apes* was written “to reinforce the idea of White supremacy and to remind White men that Africans (Black people) were savages ... Tarzan was bigger than Jack Johnson ever was or would be” (pp. 132–133). Similarly, Reynolds and Kendi mentioned that “Woodrow Wilson let Black people know what he thought about them by enjoying the first-ever film screening in the White House, of Hollywood’s first blockbuster film, D. W. Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation*” (p. 136). Reynolds and Kendi characterized the deluge of depictions of Black people in the media as a:

media storm of racist ideas that came year after year. From the stereotype that Black people were sexually immoral or hypersexual. Or that Black households were absent of fathers, and that this family dynamic made them inferior. Or that skin tone and hair texture were connected to beauty and intelligence. (pp.152–153)

Reynolds and Kendi argued mass media can reinforce ideas about Black people that can lead to threats to their life chances. For example, they connected the popularity of *Planet of the Apes* during the Black Power movement with the origin of “law and order” practices:

While Tarzan put the racist conquering of Africa and Africans on the screen, *Planet of the Apes* stoked the racist fear fire by showing the dark world rising against the White conqueror. And just like with *Tarzan*, *Planet of the Apes* went boom. Became a megahit.... And just like that, the conversation coming from the American government shifted to protect *their* “planet.” Black Power was met by a new slogan, one spat out like a racist slur. Law and order. (pp. 186–187)

Anderson (2018) demonstrated how the press helped redefine racism, which she characterized as a “key maneuver in rolling back civil rights” and explain that “confronted with headlines about KKK rallies and jackbooted sheriffs, white authority transformed those damning images of white supremacy into the sole definition of racism” (p. 137). Anderson suggested that redefining racism helped narrow its perceived scope and created colorblind racism:

The focus on the Klan ... helped to tag racism as an *individual* aberration rather than something *systemic, institutional, and pervasive*. What’s more, isolating racism to only its most virulent and visible form allowed politicians and judges to push for policies that *seemed* to meet the standard of America’s new civil rights norms while at the same time working to undermine and destabilize these norms, all too often leaving black communities ravaged. The objective was to contain and neutralize the victories of the Civil Rights Movement by painting a picture of a “colorblind,” equal opportunity society whose doors were now wide open. (p. 137)

As CRT theorists noted, focusing on individuals is a distraction, and colorblindness is often detrimental to Black people, as it leads to silence and inaction regarding institutional oppression. In fact, in her important work about mass incarceration, Alexander (2010) characterized colorblindness as being “catastrophic for African Americans” (p. 240).

Racist Discourse

Both texts demonstrated that racism can be reflected in discourse through racial epithets and coded language. According to Henry and Tator (2002), “Racist discourse refers to the ways in which society gives voice to racism” (p. 36). This was evident when Anderson (2018) offered an example aimed at Barack Obama: “Many of those sworn to serve and protect couldn’t contain their hatred of Obama. One New Hampshire police commissioner was observed sitting in a local diner glaring at the TV as he kept calling Obama a ‘f——g n——

–r” (p. 225). The most prominent way racist language was illustrated in the texts aside from racial epithets was through coded language. For instance, Anderson explained how politicians such as George Wallace used “race-neutral language to explain what was at stake for disgruntled working-class whites, particularly those whose neighborhoods butted right up against black enclaves” (p. 142). The authors of both texts also commented on how Richard Nixon employed (and enhanced) Wallace’s strategy. Anderson wrote that during Nixon’s run for the presidency in 1968:

Nixon’s handlers came up with the “Southern Strategy ...” Using strategic dog-whistle appeals (that is, coded messages) about crime and welfare for example, to trigger knee-jerk anti-black responses, Nixon succeeded in defining and maligning the Democrats as the party of black people, without once having to actually say the words. (p. 144)

Reynolds and Kendi (2020) described Nixon’s strategy this way:

And the brilliant game plan (*ugh*) Nixon used to drive an even bigger wedge and get racists on his side was to simply demean Black people in every speech, while also praising White people. But the magic trick in it all ... was that he did all this without ever actually saying “Black people” and “White people.” (pp. 191–192)

Anderson said the strategy continued during the Reagan administration, as explained by Lee Atwater, who:

pointed out that back in 1954, politicians could spew the N-word left and right. “By 1968, you can’t say ‘[the N-word]’—that hurts you. Backfires. So you say stuff like forced busing, states’ rights and all that stuff. You’re getting so abstract now you’re talking about cutting taxes, and all these things you’re talking about are totally economic things and a byproduct of them is blacks get hurt worse than whites.” (p. 170)

The texts illustrated how racist language shifted from racial epithets to coded language after the civil rights movement of the 1960s and 70s when color-blind racism began to dictate that racism is reserved for immoral, uncivilized individuals.

Messages or Lessons About Antiracism

In addition to finding manifestations of racism, I also found messages about antiracism in both titles, which aligns with critical race theorists’ aims to eradicate racism. *Stamped’s* subtitle (i.e., *Racism, Antiracism, and You*) signaled that antiracism is a prominent focus of the book, and throughout, the authors assigned the antiracist label to people, sentiments, actions, literature, and laws. They also stressed that it is possible to evolve and become antiracist later in life. Conversely, antiracism was implied in *We Are Not Yet Equal* through the actions and responses of people and organizations (e.g., NAACP) fighting against racist policies and practices. The authors of both books expressed hope that readers will be empowered to choose to become antiracist after being introduced to racism and its deleterious impact. For example, *Stamped* began by addressing the reader directly and Reynolds and Kendi (2020) shared their hope concerning the seat the reader will choose among antiracist and racist, segregationist or assimilationists, options: “Something to get you excited about choosing your seat-- *the right seat*—at the table” (p. 3, italics mine). When *Stamped* concludes, Reynolds and Kendi echoed this sentiment and reminded readers to decide which seat they will take by listing people who fit each label and stating that the list “leads back to the question of whether you, reader, want to be a segregationist (a hater), an assimilationist (a coward), or an antiracist (someone who truly loves). Choice is yours” (pp. 247–248). In Anderson’s (2018) book, hope for antiracism was implied in its call to action:

This is the moment now when all of us—black, white, Latino, Native American, Asian American—must step out of the shadow of white rage, deny its power, understand its unseemly goals, and refuse to be seduced by its buzzwords, dog whistles, and sophistry. This is when we choose a different future. (pp. 231–232)

These authors suggested that they predict the country will become antiracist through the help of readers.

IMPLICATIONS AND FINAL THOUGHTS

Current efforts to exclude discussions about racism have had devastating effects. While scholars noted discussions about race and racism were already rare in schools (e.g., Ladson-Billings, 2003; Tyson, 2003), Ladson-Billings (2003) said such discussions are more likely to take place in English language arts rather than in social studies where race is avoided altogether despite the content area's focus on civics and democracy. Yet, teaching about race and racism has been challenging for language arts and social studies teachers alike (Flynn, 2012; Reisman et al., 2020; Thomas, 2015), and the current climate makes it even more difficult for some teachers to fully embrace teaching the two texts examined here. Teachers who do teach about racism need to be aware of state and local laws around teaching about the topics, and it is important to convey to parents and students that the purpose of teaching texts about racism is not to implicate or accuse any individual of racism. Instead, the purpose is to help students understand how racism in the United States is rooted in slavery and continues to shape institutions and systems today, so they can make informed choices about how/if they want to help thwart racism. Teachers may also want to consult resources for teaching difficult history from organizations such as learningforjustice.org (formerly Teaching Tolerance), which offers numerous lesson plans, teaching strategies, articles, workshops, and

webinars about teaching challenging topics such as slavery, race, and racism and how they impact society today.

Studying books such as the ones I discussed are aligned with the goals of middle grades education. As Brinegar et al. (2020) implied, middle school educators “have a responsibility to unmask white supremacy culture,” (p. 2) which includes teaching students about racism and antiracism. Young adolescents are often observant and curious, and they want to understand the world around them. Over the last few years, racism has been one of several social issues the nation has been grappling with. Despite what anti-CRT advocates say in the media, white students are not innocent and in need of protection; they need answers to their questions and opportunities to make sense of racism. Research suggests middle grades students are interested in talking about race and racism and, according to Flynn (2012), the discussions are most productive when teachers establish safe spaces and devote time and attention to building trust, community, and effective communication. Teachers need to be prepared to have tough conversations about racism and its connection to violence, incarceration, discourse, and reduced quality of life for people of color.

Middle grades researchers stress the importance of families in young adolescents' lives and education (Bishop & Harrison, 2021; Williams et al., 2019). Students can ask family members how they define racism and antiracism and discuss moments in history when they saw each one manifested. Next, students can share in multimodal presentations what they learned from family about defining the terms. Similarly, CRT values the experiences and narratives of Black, Asian American, Latinx, and Native Americans. Teachers can also ask young adolescents to talk to family and community members about their personal experiences with and understandings of racial inequality and produce narratives that share those experiences as valid, legitimate, and instructive.

Middle schools that value interdisciplinary teaching and teams can work together to help students explore how racism manifests in science, media, discourse, and history. When using *Stamped* and *We Are Not Yet Equal*, books that explicitly discuss racism, teachers have opportunities to emphasize that racism is not an individual, random exercise carried out by a few misguided or ignorant people; it is a social construct embedded in institutions and, as CRT advocates point out, it “is an integral, permanent, and indestructible component of this society” (Bell, 1992, p. ix). Despite racism’s perceived indestructibility, some people and groups across disciplines challenge it. The authors of both books argue antiracist efforts, including laws and policies, were implemented throughout history. Students can work in small groups across subject area classes to research some of these antiracist efforts, including how many were thwarted. Also, *Stamped* explores five individuals (i.e., Cotton Mather, Thomas Jefferson, William Lloyd Garrison, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Angela Davis) that students can develop an inquiry project around. After selecting one of them to study, students can look at decisions, ideas, and actions they took that might be considered racist or antiracist. For example, examining Du Bois, whose perspectives changed over time, might help students see how an individual can have both antiracist and racist ideas and grow and evolve throughout life. Teachers can work with librarians to find biographies that appeal to middle grades readers about these individuals.

According to established middle school philosophy, students and teachers should engage in active, purposeful learning (Bishop & Harrison, 2021). Using dialogue journals, defining key terms, and exploring multiple perspectives of historical topics are three ways teachers can engage students in the middle grades classroom. Middle grades teacher and researcher, Nanci Atwell, suggests dialogue journals are an excellent way to allow students to write about texts and encourage discussion. Dialogue journals contain two parts: (a) writ-

ing about/responding to texts; and (b) reading and responding to others’ journal entries; students ask their teacher and/or a classmate to read and respond to their entries (Atwell, 1998). Ideally, when used with books about racial inequity, what transpires is a conversation between students and teachers about racism and antiracism in the country in the past and present. While with dialogue journals students have an authentic audience of their teacher and peers and can write about their responses to what they are reading about racism and antiracism in the United States, they can also use the journal to pose questions about the content and to explain or restate ideas from the books as they understand them. Students can also write about how the material in the books connect to their own lives, to other subject area classes, and to the world around them.

The books’ explorations of racism are often frank, and to some they may be jarring. Students need the language to discuss these topics. Teachers can share Kendi’s (2016) formal definitions of antiracist, racist, and assimilationist discussed in his book *Stamped From the Beginning* and encourage students to use their own words, as Reynolds and Kendi (2020) do in *Stamped: Racism, Antiracism and You*, to define the terms for themselves. As they read both *Stamped: Racism, Antiracism and You* and *We Are Not Yet Equal*, students can classify events, ideas, and people accordingly (i.e., as antiracist, racist, and assimilationist) and offer textual evidence for their choices. Helping students make sense of the complexity of racism and antiracism by having them discuss the types as they appear in the books can deepen students’ understanding of both concepts. Both books discussed include certain historical periods, events, and people. Students can examine the authors’ perspectives of similar topics and compare the two books and then note similarities and differences between the books and their textbooks. This can help students see that authors make choices and convey narratives about the past (and about racism and antiracism) in multiple ways.

The goal of this study was to analyze messages about racism and antiracism communicated in *We Are Not Yet Equal* and *Stamped: Racism, Antiracism and You*, texts that oppose the selective tradition. My analysis revealed that the authors of both texts portray how racism, as critical race theorists have noted, is ingrained in society and manifests in science, institutions, language, and media. While scholars refer to old versus new racism, these texts seem to suggest racism might appear to evolve but old and new modes, manifestations, and expressions of racism exist concurrently. We see this in recent tragedies. For instance, the racist slurs, racial violence, and eventual murder of Ahmaud Arbery, just to name one contemporary example, looks like the old racism despite that it took place in 2020 while new racism continues to thrive.

Finally, censoring books about race and racism can cause harm to the very students anti-CRT legislation purports to protect. Instead of banning these books, educators, parents, and legislators need to find out what is in them. Teachers can help middle grades students understand racism is complex and takes numerous forms and help equip students with critical thinking and reading skills so they can examine racist ideas and codes in texts, including media and popular culture, and in the world around them.

NOTES

1. Anti-CRT legislation misdefines CRT and also seeks to ban teaching about gender, sexism, and sexuality, topics beyond the scope of this article.
2. I have chosen not to capitalize white in this article unless the sources I quote do so.
3. *Stamped* was published 2 months before George Floyd was murdered by a Minneapolis police officer, and *We Are Not Yet Equal* was published 2 years prior.
4. *We Are Not Yet Equal* was written with award-winning YA nonfiction author Tonya Bolden, and its foreword is written by Nic Stone a best-selling YA author. *Stamped* was adapted by Jason Reynolds, who has won numerous

awards for YA fiction, including Coretta Scott King, Michael Printz, and Newbery honor citations. He was named the National Ambassador for Young People's Literature in 2020 and became the only writer given the opportunity to extend his term.

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APPENDIX: SYNOPSSES OF THE TEXTS

Anderson, C. with Bolden, T. (2018). *We are not yet equal: Understanding our racial divide*. Bloomsbury.

An adaptation of Carol Anderson's *White Rage* (2016), *We Are Not Yet Equal* describes how, beginning with slavery in the United States, whites have claimed supremacy and attempted to dominate Black people, largely motivated by what Anderson calls white rage, animosity that deepens and often becomes violent when whites see Black citizens thriving despite racism. The book also illustrates how Black people used available tools and strategies to resist racism.

Reynolds, J., & Kendi, I. X. (2020). *Stamped: Racism, antiracism, and you: A remix of the*

National Book award-winning Stamped From the Beginning. Little, Brown and Company.

Stamped, an adaptation of Kendi's *Stamped From the Beginning*, follows the same leaders (i.e., Cotton Mather, Thomas Jefferson, William Lloyd Garrison, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Angela Davis) featured in the original text and classifies ideas and people as antiracist or racist (i.e., in the form of assimilationist or segregationist thought). The book is written in a light, humorous tone to capture young readers' attention.