

Black Books and Dead Black Bodies: Twitter, Hashtags, and Antiracist Reading Lists

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In 2000, Janifer P. Wilson started Sisters Uptown Bookstore in Harlem, New York. For two decades, she struggled to turn a profit selling books, and so Wilson worked a different full-time job to keep her bookstore afloat. But her fortunes greatly improved during the summer of 2020, as conversations and sympathy concerning violence against black people prompted unprecedented sales of black books at black-owned booksellers. Wilson welcomed the uptick in profit yet was conflicted about the circumstances: “to have our business surge in a matter of weeks as the result of an unfortunate incident with a man losing his life and the whole world getting to see it has just impacted my spirit and soul” (de León et. al). Like many people, Linda Duggins, Senior Director of Puplicity at Grand Central Publishing, thought that it was “awesome” that conversations related to Black Lives Matter led to unprecedented support for books by African Americans and black-owned bookstores. However, she too had reservations. “It does sadden me,” she noted, “to know that the push for the sales is connected to that stacking of dead Black bodies” (de León et. al).

As life-long participants in and students of black culture, we are aware of the longstanding interest in successful black books expressed by African American literary scholars and general readers. The remarkable feats in sales and media attention African American booksellers and books about racism and white privilege achieved in June 2020 indicate that significant news coverage about brutalities committed against black people can substantially drive the interests of reader-consumers. This situation is made evident in the available data and reporting on book publishing. The relative lack of attention for African American novels and volumes of poetry suggests that these genres matter less for consumers in dire moments, at least in comparison to what is categorized as “antiracist” nonfiction. Our observations reveal that those of us who study and teach African American literature should do more to discuss the relationship between successful black books and dead black bodies.

Not long after George Floyd was killed on May 25, protestors took to the streets. Activist groups removed or altered Confederate statues. Employees prompted their employers to release public statements supporting Black Lives Matter. And, notably, people published and circulated antiracist reading lists. The lists were especially designed for apparent white audiences or other groups that presumably

overlooked the histories of black struggle and white supremacy. Journalists, scholars, librarians, and others offered roundups of titles that addressed systemic racism, and sympathetic readers responded by ordering those book recommendations—in some cases tens of thousands of select works.

Our long-standing interest in the implications of data concerning black cultural products led us to consider the convergence of protests and books sales. We focused on bestselling books supplied by NPD BookScan and presented in *Publisher's Weekly*. During the month of May, virtually no book on the top ten bestseller list dealt directly with antiracist topics or subjects, though Michelle Obama's autobiography *Becoming* remained on the list. In the first week of June, however, a discernible shift took place. *So You Want to Talk about Race* (2018) by Ijeoma Oluo entered the bestseller list at number 2 with 35,859 sales for the week, and *White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk about Racism* (2018) by Robin DiAngelo was ranked number 3 with 30,221 sales. The next week, Oluo's and DiAngelo's books remained on the top ten bestsellers list and were joined by Ibram X. Kendi with *Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America* (2016) at the #5 spot and *How to Be an Antiracist* (2019) at the #7 spot with sales at 37,862 and 26,755, respectively.

Between May 25, when Floyd was killed, and July 3, the last date for which we collected book data, DiAngelo's *White Fragility* sold 408,401 copies; Kendi's *How to Be an Antiracist* sold 308,309; and Oluo's sold 185,850. Put another way, those three books, along with Kendi's *Stamped from the Beginning*, sold more than 1 million copies in June. Those are extraordinary figures for books that address racism and white privilege. The publication and social media circulation of numerous antiracist reading lists were part of the reason these books emerged on the bestseller lists. Antiracist reading lists are nothing new, but the profusion of those lists after a brutal killing unquestionably heightened reader-consumer interest in the topics.

Less than two weeks after Floyd was killed, dozens of publications, including *The Guardian*, *The New York Times*, *TIME*, and *Vogue* to name only a few, released antiracist reading lists. Nonfiction titles pervaded the book roundups. In addition to works by Kendi, DiAngelo, and Oluo, the lists frequently included Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (2010), Bryan Stevenson's *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption* (2014), Ta-Nehisi Coates's *Between the World and Me* (2015), and Layla F. Saad's *Me and White Supremacy: Combat Racism, Change the World, and Become a Good Ancestor* (2020). Numerous public libraries published lists of books and educational resources concerning racism and social justice on their websites. The phrase "antiracist reading list" appeared only sporadically prior to June 2020, at which point the term became linked to Floyd and the subsequent protests.

Each year since 2015, more than two hundred black people were killed in encounters with police officers. Hardly any of those deaths led dozens of media outlets to publish antiracist reading lists. Moreover, in the past, consumers were apparently not inspired to purchase collectively hundreds of thousands of social justice books in a concentrated period of time. Scholar Lauren Michele Jackson critiqued the aims of antiracist reading lists, explaining that “the goal is no longer to learn more about race, power, and capital, but to spring closer to the enlightened order of the antiracist.” The lists suggest that becoming an antiracist surpassed the idea of becoming an engaged reader of, say, African American literary art. Reading novels by Toni Morrison and Colson Whitehead or short stories by Edward P. Jones and Nafissa Thompson-Spires perhaps do not offer the kinds of instructions that readers seek when they purchase *White Fragility*, *So You Want to Talk about Race*, or *How to Be Antiracist*. Ultimately, antiracist reading lists privilege explaining race and racism, especially to white people, while diminishing the possibility of black readers exploring varied considerations, especially in artistic and creative genres.

People typically show interest in one or two antiracist or social justice books at a time, but rarely have bestseller lists been dominated by social justice literature. Only after Officer Derek Chauvin held Floyd down by his neck for eight minutes and forty-six seconds did reader-consumers, outraged by yet another death of an unarmed black man, turn to books and black bookstores as they did in June. There was some precedent though. On June 17, 2015, Dylann Roof killed nine black people at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in South Carolina. The publisher Spiegel & Grau had initially set a September release date for Coates’s *Between the World and Me*. However, officials at the publisher decided to move the publication date up to July 14, in view of the public conversation taking place in response to the atrocities Roof committed as an act of white supremacy. *Between the World and Me* was a tremendous success, selling over 500,000 copies within a year of its release. The publication of a book discussing the American tradition fatally harm African Americans in the aftermath of the horrifying murder at Mother Emanuel church anticipated the increased attention on books addressing the problems of whiteness and racism.

The interest in antiracist books in June 2020 was marked by disproportionate numbers of black people affected by the coronavirus, national and international protests in response to racialized police violence, and persistent circulation of reading lists highlighting the most relevant titles. Large numbers of readers chose to further demonstrate their support for black people by making their book purchases through African American booksellers. “We’ve probably sold more books in the last month than we sold our entire first year in business,” said one

black bookstore owner in an interview with *The Washington Post* (Mayes et. al). “Since the protest started, we are seeing pretty overwhelming support from what, based on the reading list, appear to be well-intentioned white folks that are trying to educate themselves about race in America and anti-racism.” Libraries across the country also reported a significant increase in requests for antiracist and social justice literature (Mayes et. al). Without the terrifying video of a white police officer extinguishing Floyd’s life, who knows what reading about race in America in June 2020 would have looked like?

To help us track the online discourse surrounding antiracist reading lists to see how Floyd’s death appeared in discussions on Twitter, we enlisted the help of Tre Merritt, a Mellon Fellow, rising junior, and English major at Howard University. Tre recently finished Howard’s Mellon-Mays Digital Humanities summer institute where he acquired a range of skills related to data analysis. Tre scraped Twitter and identified 3,598 tweets that contained the hashtag “#HowToBeAnAntiRacist.” We used these tweets to track the online discourse on Twitter before and after Floyd’s death regarding this particular hashtag. Tre assisted us by running two topic modeling experiments—a process allowing humanities scholars to recognize key points and patterns in large bodies of information. Between May 27, 2018 and May 24, 2020, the hashtag #HowToBeAnAntiRacist generated 2,095 tweets with the majority (1,140) occurring between August and September 2019. The majority of the tweets referenced Kendi’s book. The various topics ranged from themes of institutional racism, live book discussions, and online reviews related to the hashtag and presumably the book. The phrase “Black Lives Matter” was only minimally linked to the “#HowToBeAnAntiRacist.”

Between May 25 and July 12, 2020, after Floyd’s murder, the same hashtag associated with Kendi’s book generated 1,505 tweets. In a little over a month, the book generated more than half of the tweets it did the previous two years. The hashtag #HowToBeAnAntiRacist represented Kendi’s book and became more readily associated with “Black Lives Matter” and “BLM” hashtags. In addition, #HowToBeAnAntiRacist was frequently linked to the phrase “White Fragility,” especially after the death of George Floyd. Our research confirmed the extents to which social justice terms, slogans, book titles, and the names of people who have been killed converge during a defining moment.

There are some indications that support for social justice and the practice of antiracism will expand. Public opinion has greatly shifted in favor of Black Lives Matter. Several activist groups received an influx of cash contributions to support their work. Furthermore, the Ford and Mellon Foundations, both led by African Americans, Darren Walker and Elizabeth Alexander respectively, have recently

signaled that they will devote far more of their substantial financial resources and cultural capital to social justice projects. These shifts will have far-reaching consequences for the arts and humanities as well as the future of black books.

To what extent, though, will the rise of nonfiction about racism and white privilege affect interest in traditional genres covered in African American literature courses? So far, relatively few novels, collections of short stories, and volumes of poetry have appeared on antiracist reading lists. Canonical figures like Morrison, Zora Neale Hurston, Richard Wright, and others are likely secure in college curriculums, yet emergent African American creative writers will likely struggle to gain wide, enduring readerships. In the aftermath of George Floyd, with large numbers of people seeking out books that describe racism, police brutality, and white privilege, it seems reader-consumers have preferred explanatory texts rather than artistic ones.

Works Cited

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