CHAPTER 17

SUCCESS

FINANCE SCHOLAR BOYCE Watkins lectured on racism as a disease. I agonized over this conception. Not foundational enough, eternal enough, revolutionary enough on this eleventh evening of Black History Month in 2010. When the question-and-answer period arrived, I tossed up my arm from the back row, as Caridad smiled.

Caridad and I had been whispering for most of the lecture. For once, I felt confidence tingling in my head. Days before, Professor Asante had hooded me with my doctoral degree at Temple's commencement. The teen who hated school had finished graduate school in 2010, had committed himself to school for life.

Caridad was probably the one who ushered me to the lecture at SUNY Oneonta, our state college in the town of Oneonta, in upstate New York. Forgive me for calling Oneonta a town. Rural White people from surrounding areas labeled Oneonta "the city."

At Oneonta, Whiteness surrounded me like clouds from a plane's window, which didn't mean I found no White colleagues who were genial and caring. But it was Caridad, and all her

Puerto Rican feminism and antiracism, who took me by the arm when I arrived as a dissertation fellow in 2008 and brought me closer when I stayed in 2009.

We were bound to become as close as our chairs. I filled the Black history post left vacant by Caridad's husband of eighteen years, Ralph. Metastatic cancer had taken Ralph's Black body in 2007. She probably could not look at me without seeing me standing in Ralph's shoes.

Her husband lost his fight to cancer but Caridad's life as an Afro-Latinx woman had brought its own fights—for peace, to be still. But she was a fighter, tireless and durable, as antiracists must be to succeed.

SUCCESS. THE DARK road we fear. Where antiracist power and policy predominate. Where equal opportunities and thus outcomes exist between the equal groups. Where people blame policy, not people, for societal problems. Where nearly everyone has more than they have today. Where racist power lives on the margins, like antiracist power does today. Where antiracist ideas are our common sense, like racist ideas are today.

Neither failure nor success is written. The story of our generation will be based on what we are willing to do. Are we willing to endure the grueling fight against racist power and policy? Are we willing to transform the antiracist power we gather within us to antiracist power in our society?

Caridad was willing, which strengthened my will. Caridad understood that even as her students struggled with racist and gender-racist and queer-racist and class-racist ideas, they also had within them the capacity to learn and change. She did not free the antiracist power within them with ideological attacks. Her classes were more like firm hugs tailored to each student's experience, compelling self-reflection. She took her Black and Latinx students—who were fighting their own anti-African cultural conditioning—to Ghana each year, where they found themselves eagerly immersed in their African ancestry by the trip's end.

Meanwhile, I fought to survive at the intersections. The impulses of my bigoted past constantly threatened to take me back to the plantation of racist power. Caridad extended the arms of Kaila, Yaba, and Weckea around me, ensuring I did not revert to my old thinking when I left Temple.

"INSTEAD OF DESCRIBING racism as a disease, don't you think racism is more like an organ?" I asked the lecturer. "Isn't racism essential for America to function? Isn't the system of racism essential for America to live?"

All my leading questions did not bait Boyce Watkins into a defense of his disease conception. Too bad. I wanted to engage him. I was not much of an intellectual. I closed myself off to new ideas that did not *feel* good. Meaning I shopped for conceptions of racism that fit my ideology and self-identity.

Asking antiracists to change their perspective on racism can be as destabilizing as asking racists to change their perspective on the races. Antiracists can be as doctrinaire in their view of racism as racists can be in their view of not-racism. How can antiracists ask racists to open their minds and change when we are closed-minded and unwilling to change? I ignored my own hypocrisy, as people customarily do when it means giving up what they hold dear. Giving up my conception of racism meant giving up my view of the world and myself. I would not without a fight. I would lash out at anyone who "attacked" me with new ideas, unless I feared and respected them like I feared and respected Kaila and Yaba.

I DERIVED MY perspective on racism from a book I first read in graduate school. When both Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders spoke of "institutional racism" on the presidential campaign trail in 2016, when the activists who demonstrated at their events spoke of "institutional racism," they were using, whether they realized it or not, a formulation coined in 1967 by Black Power

activist Kwame Toure and political scientist Charles Hamilton in *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America.*

"Racism is both overt and covert," Toure and Hamilton explained. "It takes two, closely related forms: individual whites acting against individual blacks, and acts by the total white community against the black community. We call these individual racism and institutional racism. The first consists of overt acts by individuals. . . . The second type is less overt, far more subtle, less identifiable in terms of *specific* individuals committing the acts." They distinguished, for example, the individual racism of "white terrorists" who bomb a Black church and kill Black children from the institutional racism of "when in that same city—Birmingham, Alabama—five hundred black babies die each year because of the lack of proper food, shelter and medical facilities."

It is, as I thought upon first read, the gloomy system keeping us down and dead. The system's acts are covert, just as the racist ideas of the people are implicit. I could not wrap my head around the system or precisely define it, but I knew the system was there, like the polluted air in our atmosphere, poisoning Black people to the benefit of White people.

But what if the atmosphere of racism has been polluting most White people, too? And what if racism has been working in the opposite way for a handful of Black individuals, who find the fresh air of wealth and power in racist atmospheres? Framing institutional racism as acts by the "total White community against the total Black community" accounts for the ways White people benefit from racist policies when compared to their racial peers. (White poor benefit more than Black poor. White women benefit more than Black women. White gays benefit more than Black gays.) But this framing of White people versus Black people does *not* take into account that all White people do not benefit equally from racism. For instance, it doesn't take into account how rich Whites benefit more from racist policies than White poor and middle-income people. It does not take into account that Black people are not harmed equally by racism or that some Black individuals exploit racism to boost their own wealth and power.

But I did not care. I thought I had it all figured out. I thought of racism as an inanimate, invisible, immortal system, not as a living, recognizable, mortal disease of cancer cells that we could identify and treat and kill. I considered the system as essential to the United States as the Constitution. At times, I thought White people covertly operated the system, fixed it to benefit the total White community at the expense of the total Black community.

The construct of covert institutional racism opens American eyes to racism and, ironically, closes them, too. Separating the overt individual from the covert institutional veils the specific policy choices that cause racial inequities, policies made by specific people. Covering up the specific policies and policymakers prevents us from identifying and replacing the specific policies and policymakers. We become unconscious to racist policymakers and policies as we lash out angrily at the abstract bogeyman of "the system."

The perpetrators behind the five hundred Black babies dying each year in Birmingham "because of the lack of proper food, shelter and medical facilities" were no less overt than the "white terrorists" who killed four Black girls in a Birmingham church in 1963. In the way investigators can figure out exactly who those church bombers were, investigators can figure out exactly what policies caused five hundred Black babies to die each year and exactly who put those policies in place. In the way people have learned to see racist abuse coming out of the mouths of individual racists, people can learn to see racial inequities emerging from racist policies. All forms of racism are overt if our antiracist eyes are open to seeing racist policy in racial inequity.

But we do not see. Our eyes have been closed by racist ideas and the unacknowledged bond between the institutional antiracist and the post-racialist. They bond on the idea that institutional racism is often unseen and unseeable. Because it is covert, the institutional antiracist says. Because it hardly exists, the post-racialist says.

A similar bond exists between implicit bias and post-racialism. They bond on the idea that racist ideas are buried in the mind.

Because they are implicit and unconscious, implicit bias says. Because they are dead, post-racialism says.

TOURE AND HAMILTON could not have foreseen how their concepts of overt and covert racism would be used by people across the ideological board to turn racism into something hidden and unknowable. Toure and Hamilton were understandably focused on distinguishing the individual from the institutional. They were reacting to the same moderate and liberal and assimilationist forces that all these years later still reduce racism to the individual acts of White Klansmen and Jim Crow politicians and Tea Party Republicans and N-word users and White nationalist shooters and Trumpian politicos. "'Respectable' individuals can absolve themselves from individual blame: they would never plant a bomb in a church; they would never stone a black family," Toure and Hamilton wrote. "But they continue to support political officials and institutions that would and do perpetuate institutionally racist policies."

The term "institutionally racist policies" is more concrete than "institutional racism." The term "racist policies" is more concrete than "institutionally racist policies," since "institutional" and "policies" are redundant: Policies are institutional. But I still occasionally use the terms "institutional racism" and "systemic racism" and "structural racism" and "overt" and "covert." They are like my first language of racism. But when we realize old words do not exactly and clearly convey what we are trying to describe, we should turn to new words. I struggle to concretely explain what "institutional racism" means to the Middle Eastern small businessman, the Black service worker, the White teacher, the Latinx nurse, the Asian factory worker, and the Native store clerk who do not take the courses on racism, do not read the books on racism, do not go to the lectures on racism, do not watch the specials on racism, do not listen to the podcasts on racism, do not attend the rallies against racism.

I try to keep everyday people in mind when I use "racist policies" instead of "institutional racism."

Policymakers and policies make societies and institutions, not the other way around. The United States is a racist nation because its policymakers and policies have been racist from the beginning. The conviction that racist policymakers can be overtaken, and racist policies can be changed, and the racist minds of their victims can be changed, is disputed only by those invested in preserving racist policymakers, policies, and habits of thinking.

Racism has always been terminal *and* curable. Racism has always been recognizable and mortal.

THE RAIN FELL on his gray hooded sweatshirt. It was February 26, 2012, a boring Sunday evening. I looked forward to my first book, on Black student activism in the late 1960s, being published in two weeks. The hooded teen looked forward to enjoying the watermelon juice and Skittles he'd purchased from a nearby 7-Eleven. The seventeen-year-old was easygoing, laid-back, like his strut. He adored LeBron James, hip-hop, and *South Park*, and dreamed of one day piloting airplanes.

Over six feet tall and lanky, Trayvon Martin ambled back in the rain to the Retreat at Twin Lakes. His father, Tracy Martin, had been dating a woman who lived in the gated community in Sanford, a suburb of Orlando, Florida. Tracy had brought along his son to talk to him, to refocus his mind on attending college like his older brother. Trayvon had just been suspended for carrying a bag with a trace of marijuana at his Miami high school. While suburban White teenage boys partied and drank and drove and smoked and snorted and assaulted to a chorus of "boys will be boys," urban Black boys faced zero tolerance in a policed state.

Martin dodged puddles on his slow stroll home. He called his girlfriend. He talked and walked through the front gate (or took a shortcut) into the cluster of sandy-colored two-story townhouses. As in many neighborhoods during the Great Recession,

investors had been buying foreclosed properties and renting them out. With renters came unfamiliar faces, transient faces, and racists who connected the presence of Black teenagers with the "rash" of seven burglaries in 2011. They promptly organized a neighborhood-watch group.

The watch-group organizer was born a year after me, to a White Vietnam veteran and a Peruvian immigrant. Raised not far from where my family moved to in Manassas, Virginia, George Zimmerman moved to Florida as I did, after graduating high school. His assault conviction and domestic-violence accusations altered his plans to be a police officer. But nothing altered his conviction that the Black body—and not his own—was the criminal in his midst.

Zimmerman decided to run an errand. He hopped in his truck, his licensed slim 9-millimeter handgun tucked in a holster in his waistband. He drove. He noticed a hooded Black teenager walking through the complex. He dialed 911. The Black body's presence, a crime. The historic crime of racist ideas.

I DID NOT plan for my second book to be a history of racist ideas, as Zimmerman zeroed in on what could have been any Black male body, as he zeroed in on the teenager President Obama thought "could have been my son." After my first book, on the Black Campus Movement, I planned to research the student origins of Black studies in the 1960s. Then I realized that Black students were demanding Black studies because they considered all the existing disciplines to be racist. That the liberal scholars dominating those disciplines were refusing to identify their assimilationist ideas as racist. That they were identifying as not-racist, like the segregationists they were calling racist. That Black students were calling them both racist, redefining racist ideas. I wanted to write a long history using Black students' redefinition of racist ideas. But the daunting task scared me, like Zimmerman's glare scared Martin.

Martin called a friend and told his friend he was being fol-

lowed. He picked up the pace. "Hey, we've had some break-ins in my neighborhood," Zimmerman told the 911 dispatcher. "And there's a real suspicious guy. This guy looks like he's up to no good, or he's on drugs or something. . . . A dark hoodie, like a gray hoodie." He asked how long it would take for an officer to get there, because "these assholes, they always get away."

Martin ran. Zimmerman leapt out of his car in pursuit, gun at his waist, phone in hand. The dispatcher told him to stop. Zimmerman ended the call and caught up to Martin, a dozen or so minutes after 7:00 P.M. Only one person living knows exactly what happened next: Zimmerman, probably fighting to "apprehend" the "criminal." Martin probably fighting off the actual criminal for his life. Zimmerman squeezing the trigger and ending Martin's life. Claiming self-defense to save his own life. A jury agreeing, on July 13, 2013.

HEARTBROKEN, ALICIA GARZA typed "Black Lives Matter" into the mourning nights, into the Black caskets piling up before her as people shouted all those names from Trayvon Martin to Michael Brown to Sandra Bland to Korryn Gaines. The deaths and accusations and denials and demonstrations and deaths—it all gave me the strength each day to research for *Stamped from the Beginning*.

By the summer of 2012, I was finding and tagging every racist idea I could find from history. Racist ideas piled up before me like trash at a landfill. Tens of thousands of pages of Black people being trashed as natural or nurtured beasts, devils, animals, rapists, slaves, criminals, kids, predators, brutes, idiots, prostitutes, cheats, and dependents. More than five hundred years of toxic ideas on the Black body. Day after week, week after month, month after year, oftentimes twelve hours a day for three horrifically long years, I waded through this trash, consumed this trash, absorbed its toxicity, before I released a tiny portion of this trash onto the page.

All that trash, ironically, cleansed my mind if it did not cleanse

my gut. While collecting this trash, I realized I had been unwittingly doing so my whole life. Some I had tossed away after facing myself in the mirror. Some trash remained. Like the dirty bags of traces of "them niggers" and "White people are devils" and "servile Asians" and "terrorist Middle Easterners" and "dangerous Black neighborhoods" and "weak Natives" and "angry Black women" and "invading Latinx" and "irresponsible Black mothers" and "deadbeat Black fathers." A mission to uncover and critique America's life of racist ideas turned into a mission to uncover and critique my life of racist ideas, which turned into a lifelong mission to be antiracist.

It happens for me in successive steps, these steps to be an antiracist.

I stop using the "I'm not a racist" or "I can't be racist" defense of denial.

I admit the definition of racist (someone who is supporting racist policies or expressing racist ideas).

I confess the racist policies I support and racist ideas I express.

I accept their source (my upbringing inside a nation making us racist).

I acknowledge the definition of antiracist (someone who is supporting antiracist policies or expressing antiracist ideas).

I struggle for antiracist power and policy in my spaces. (Seizing a policymaking position. Joining an antiracist organization or protest. Publicly donating my time or privately donating my funds to antiracist policymakers, organizations, and protests fixated on changing power and policy.)

I struggle to remain at the antiracist intersections where racism is mixed with other bigotries. (Eliminating racial distinctions in biology and behavior. Equalizing racial distinctions in ethnicities, bodies, cultures, colors, classes, spaces, genders, and sexualities.)

I struggle to think with antiracist ideas. (Seeing racist policy in racial inequity. Leveling group differences. Not being fooled into generalizing individual negativity. Not being fooled by misleading statistics or theories that blame people for racial inequity.)

Racist ideas fooled me nearly my whole life. I refused to allow them to continue making a fool out of me, a chump out of me, a slave out of me. I realized there is nothing wrong with any of the racial groups and everything wrong with individuals like me who think there is something wrong with any of the racial groups. It felt so good to cleanse my mind.

But I did not cleanse my body. I kept most of the toxic trash in my gut between 2012 and 2015. Did not talk about most of it. Tried to laugh it off. Did not address the pain of feeling the racist ideas butchering my Black body for centuries. But how could I worry about my body as I stared at police officers butchering the Black body almost every week on my cellphone? How could I worry about my body when racists blamed the dead, when the dead's loved ones cried and raged and numbed?

How could I worry about my suffering while Sadiqa suffered?