

STAMPED FROM THE BEGINNING

*The Definitive History of
Racist Ideas in America*

Ibram X. Kendi



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To the lives they said don't matter

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Prologue

EVERY HISTORIAN WRITES IN—and is impacted by—a precise historical moment. My moment, this book's moment, coincides with the televised and untelevised killings of unarmed human beings at the hands of law enforcement officials, and with the televised and untelevised life of the shooting star of #Black Lives Matter during America's stormiest nights. I somehow managed to write this book between the heartbreaks of Trayvon Martin and Rekia Boyd and Michael Brown and Freddie Gray and the Charleston 9 and Sandra Bland, heartbreaks that are a product of America's history of racist ideas as much as this history book of racist ideas is a product of these heartbreaks.

Young Black males were *twenty-one times* more likely to be killed by police than their White counterparts between 2010 and 2012, according to federal statistics. The under-recorded, under-analyzed racial disparities between female victims of lethal police force may be even greater. Federal data show that the median wealth of White households is a staggering *thirteen times* the median wealth of Black households—and Black people are *five times* more likely to be incarcerated than Whites.¹

But these statistics should come as no surprise. Most Americans are probably aware of these racial disparities in police killings, in wealth, in prisons—in nearly every sector of US society. By racial disparities, I mean how racial groups are not statistically represented according to their populations. If Black people make up 13.2 percent of the US population, then Black people should make up somewhere close to 13 percent of the Americans killed by the police, somewhere close to 13 percent of the Americans sitting in prisons, somewhere

close to owning 13 percent of US wealth. But today, the United States remains nowhere close to racial parity. African Americans own 2.7 percent of the nation's wealth, and make up 40 percent of the incarcerated population. These are racial disparities, and racial disparities are older than the life of the United States.²

In 2016, the United States is celebrating its 240th birthday. But even before Thomas Jefferson and the other founders declared independence, Americans were engaging in a polarizing debate over racial disparities, over why they exist and persist, and over why White Americans as a group were prospering more than Black Americans as a group. Historically, there have been three sides to this heated argument. A group we can call *segregationists* has blamed Black people themselves for the racial disparities. A group we can call *antiracists* has pointed to racial discrimination. A group we can call *assimilationists* has tried to argue for both, saying that Black people *and* racial discrimination were to blame for racial disparities. During the ongoing debate over police killings, these three sides to the argument have been on full display. *Segregationists* have been blaming the recklessly criminal behavior of the Black people who were killed by police officers. Michael Brown was a monstrous, threatening thief; therefore Darren Wilson had reason to fear him and to kill him. *Antiracists* have been blaming the recklessly racist behavior of the police. The life of this dark-skinned eighteen-year-old did not matter to Darren Wilson. *Assimilationists* have tried to have it both ways. Both Wilson and Brown acted like irresponsible criminals.

Listening to this three-way argument in recent years has been like listening to the three distinct arguments you will hear throughout *Stamped from the Beginning*. For nearly six centuries, antiracist ideas have been pitted against *two* kinds of racist ideas: segregationist and assimilationist. The history of racist ideas that follows is the history of these three distinct voices—segregationists, assimilationists, and antiracists—and how they each have rationalized racial disparities, arguing why Whites have remained on the living and winning end, while Blacks remained on the losing and dying end.

THE TITLE *STAMPED FROM THE BEGINNING* comes from a speech that Mississippi senator Jefferson Davis gave on the floor of the US Senate on April 12, 1860. This future president of the Confederacy objected to a bill funding Black education in Washington, DC. "This Government was not founded by negroes nor for negroes," but "by white men for white men," Davis lectured his colleagues. The bill was based on the false notion of racial equality, he declared. The "inequality of the white and black races" was "stamped from the beginning."³

It may not be surprising that Jefferson Davis regarded Black people as biologically distinct and inferior to White people—and Black skin as an ugly stamp on the beautiful White canvas of normal human skin—and this Black stamp as a signifier of the Negro's everlasting inferiority. This kind of segregationist thinking is perhaps easier to identify—and easier to condemn—as obviously racist. And yet so many prominent Americans, many of whom we celebrate for their progressive ideas and activism, many of whom had very good intentions, subscribed to assimilationist thinking that also served up racist beliefs about Black inferiority. We have remembered assimilationists' glorious struggle against racial discrimination, and tucked away their inglorious partial blaming of inferior Black behavior for racial disparities. In embracing biological racial equality, assimilationists point to environment—hot climates, discrimination, culture, and poverty—as the creators of inferior Black behaviors. For solutions, they maintain that the ugly Black stamp can be erased—that inferior Black behaviors can be developed, given the proper environment. As such, assimilationists constantly encourage Black adoption of White cultural traits and/or physical ideals. In his landmark 1944 study of race relations, a study widely regarded as one of the instigators of the civil rights movement, Swedish economist and Nobel Laureate Gunnar Myrdal wrote, "It is to the advantage of American Negroes as individuals and as a group to become assimilated into American culture, to acquire the traits held in esteem by the dominant white Americans." He had also claimed, in *An American Dilemma*, that "in practically all its divergences, American Negro culture is . . . a distorted development, or a pathological condition, of the general American culture."⁴

But there is, and has always been, a persistent line of antiracist thought in this country, challenging those assimilationist and segregationist lines, and giving the line of truth hope. Antiracists have long argued that racial discrimination was stamped from the beginning of America, which explains why racial disparities have existed and persisted. Unlike segregationists and assimilationists, antiracists have recognized that the different skin colors, hair textures, behaviors, and cultural ways of Blacks and Whites are on the same level, are equal in all their divergences. As the legendary Black lesbian poet Audre Lorde lectured in 1980: "We have no patterns for relating across our human differences as equals."⁵

THERE WAS NOTHING simple or straightforward or predictable about racist ideas, and thus their history. Frankly speaking, for generations of Americans, racist ideas have been their common sense. The simple logic of racist ideas has manipulated millions over the years, muffling the more complex antiracist reality again and again. And so, this history could not be made for readers in an easy-to-predict narrative of absurd racists clashing with reasonable antiracists. This history could not be made for readers in an easy-to-predict, two-sided Hollywood battle of obvious good versus obvious evil, with good triumphing in the end. From the beginning, it has been a three-sided battle, a battle of antiracist ideas being pitted against two kinds of racist ideas at the same time, with evil and good failing and triumphing in the end. Both segregationist and assimilationist ideas have been wrapped up in attractive arguments to seem good, and both have made sure to re-wrap antiracist ideas as evil. And in wrapping their ideas in goodness, segregationists and assimilationists have rarely confessed to their racist public policies and ideas. But why would they? Racists confessing to their crimes is not in their self-interest. It has been smarter and more exonerating to identify what they did and said as not racist. Criminals hardly ever acknowledge their crimes against humanity. And the shrewdest and most powerful anti-Black criminals have legalized their criminal activities, have managed to define their crimes

of slave trading and enslaving and discriminating and killing outside of the criminal code. Likewise, the shrewdest and most powerful racist ideologues have managed to define their ideas outside of racism. Actually, assimilationists first used and defined and popularized the term "racism" during the 1940s. All the while, they refused to define their own assimilationist ideas of Black *behavioral* inferiority as racist. These assimilationists defined only segregationist ideas of Black *biological* inferiority as racist. And segregationists, too, have always resisted the label of "racist." They have claimed instead that they were merely articulating God's word, nature's design, science's plan, or plain old common sense.⁶

All these self-serving efforts by powerful factions to define their racist rhetoric as nonracist has left Americans thoroughly divided over, and ignorant of, what racist ideas truly are. It has all allowed Americans who think something is wrong with Black people to believe, somehow, that they are not racists. But to say something is wrong with a group is to say something is inferior about that group. These sayings are interlocked logically whether Americans realize it or not, whether Americans are willing to admit it or not. Any comprehensive history of racist ideas must grapple with the ongoing manipulation and confusion, must set the record straight on those who are espousing racist ideas and those who are not. My definition of a racist idea is a simple one: it is any concept that regards one racial group as inferior or superior to another racial group in any way. I define anti-Black racist ideas—the subject of this book—as any idea suggesting that Black people, or any group of Black people, are inferior in any way to another racial group.

Like the other identifiable races, Black people are in reality a collection of groups differentiated by gender, class, ethnicity, sexuality, culture, skin color, profession, and nationality—among a series of other identifiers, including biracial people who may or may not identify as Black. Each and every identifiable Black group has been subjected to what critical race theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw has called "intersectionality"—prejudice stemming from the intersections of racist ideas and other forms of bigotry, such as sexism, classism, ethnocentrism, and homophobia. For example, sexist notions of real women as weak, and

racist notions of Black women as not really women, have intersected to produce the *gender racism* of the strong Black woman, inferior to the pinnacle of womanhood, the weak White woman. In other words, to call women as a group stupid is sexism. To call Black people as a group stupid is racism. To call *Black* women as a group stupid is gender racism. Such intersections have also led to articulations of class racism (demeaning the *Black* poor and *Black* elites), queer racism (demeaning *Black* lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and transgender people), and ethnic racism (concocting a hierarchy of *Black* ethnic groups), to name a few. Sweeping histories of racist ideas have traditionally focused on racism toward Black people in general, neglecting intersecting conceptions of specific Black groups—or even of Black spaces, such as Black neighborhoods, Black schools, Black businesses, and Black churches. *Stamped from the Beginning* focuses its narration on both—on the general as well as specific forms of assimilationist and segregationist ideas.⁷

STAMPED FROM THE BEGINNING narrates the entire history of racist ideas, from their origins in fifteenth-century Europe, through colonial times when the early British settlers carried racist ideas to America, all the way to the twenty-first century and current debates about the events taking place on our streets. Five main characters, in particular, will serve as our tour guides as we explore the landscape of racial ideas through five periods in American history. During America's first century, racist theological ideas were absolutely critical to sanctioning the growth of American slavery and making it acceptable to the Christian churches. These ideas were featured in the sermons of early America's greatest preacher and intellectual, Boston divine Cotton Mather (1663–1728), our first tour guide. Cotton Mather was the namesake and grandson of two of New England's intellectual trailblazers, John Cotton and Richard Mather, Puritan preachers who helped carry two-hundred-year-old racist ideas from Europe across the Atlantic Ocean. To substantiate American slavery and win converts, Cotton Mather preached racial inequality in body while insisting that the dark souls of enslaved Africans would become White when they became Christians. His writings

and sermons were widely read in the colonies and in Europe, where the progenitors of the scientific revolution—and then the Enlightenment—were racializing and whitening Europeans, freedom, civilization, rationality, and beauty. During the American Revolution and thereafter, years that saw the stunning growth of American slavery, politicians and secular intellectuals alike joined slavery's justifying fray. These justifiers included one of the most powerful politicians and secular intellectuals of the new United States—our second tour guide, the antislavery, anti-abolitionist Thomas Jefferson (1743–1826).

Jefferson died on the eve of the nineteenth century's movement for emancipation and civil rights, a movement partially spearheaded by the pulsating editor of *The Liberator*, William Lloyd Garrison (1805–1879), tour guide number three. Like his peers, Garrison's most instrumentally passionate antislavery ideas drawing Americans to the cause of abolition and civil rights were usually not antiracist ideas. He popularized the assimilationist idea that slavery—or racial discrimination more broadly—had “imbruted” Black people; this oppression had made their cultures, psychologies, and behaviors inferior. It is one antiracist thing to say discriminators treated Black people like they were barbarians. It is yet another racist thing to say the discrimination actually transformed Black people into barbarians. The nation's first great professionally trained Black scholar, W. E. B. Du Bois (1868–1963), our fourth tour guide, initially adopted Garrison's racist idea. But he also stood at the forefront of antiracist ideas, challenging Jim Crow's rise in the late nineteenth century. Over the course of his long and storied career into the twentieth century, Du Bois's double-consciousness of racist and antiracist ideas amazingly transfigured into a single consciousness of antiracism. In the process, however, his influence waned. In the 1950s and 1960s, racist arguments once again became the most influential ideas drawing Americans to the cause of civil rights. Later, civil rights and Black power advances—and the sensationalized “crises” of Black single-parent households, welfare “queens,” affirmative action, and violent rebels and criminals—all fed a ravishing racist backlash to the racial progress of the 1960s, including the judicial persecution of anti-racist activists, most famously a young philosopher from the University

of California at Los Angeles. Exonerated of all capital charges in 1972, Angela Davis (1943–present) spent the next four decades opposing the racial discriminators who learned to hide their intent, denouncing those who promoted end-of-racism fairytales while advocating bipartisan tough-on-crime policies and a prison-industrial complex that engineered the mass incarceration, beatings, and killings of Black people by law enforcement. She will be our fifth and final tour guide.

These five main characters—Cotton Mather, Thomas Jefferson, William Lloyd Garrison, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Angela Davis—were arguably the most consistently prominent or provocative racial theorists of their respective lifetimes, writing and speaking and teaching racial (and nonracial) ideas that were as fascinating as they were original, influential, and/or contradictory. But *Stamped from the Beginning* is not a set of five biographies of these people. Their complex lives and influential ideas have sat at the apex of debates between assimilationists and segregationists, or between racists and antiracists, and thus provide a window to those debates, to this intricately woven history.

STAMPED FROM THE BEGINNING is not merely a history of overt racism becoming covert; nor is it a history of racial progress, or a history of ignorance and hate. *Stamped from the Beginning* rewrites the history of racist ideas by exposing the incompleteness of these three widely believed historical storylines. Racist intentions—not policies—became covert after the 1960s. Old and new racist policies remained as overt as ever, and we can see the effects of these policies whenever we see racial disparities in everything from wealth to health in the twenty-first century. That's not to say that antiracist reformers have not made progress in exposing and burying racist policies over the years. But racist reformers have made progress, too. The outlawing of chattel slavery in 1865 brought on racial progress. Then, the legalization of Jim Crow brought on the progression of racist policies in the late nineteenth century. The outlawing of Jim Crow in 1964 brought on racial progress. Then, the legalization of superficially unintentional discrimination brought on the progression of racist policies in the late twentieth century.

In order to fully explain the complex history of racist ideas, *Stamped from the Beginning* must chronicle this racial progress and the simultaneous progression of racist policies. Hate and ignorance have not driven the history of racist ideas in America. Racist policies have driven the history of racist ideas in America. And this fact becomes apparent when we examine the causes behind, not the consumption of racist ideas, but the production of racist ideas. What caused US senator John C. Calhoun of South Carolina in 1837 to produce the racist idea of slavery as a "positive good," when he knew slavery's torturous horrors? What caused Atlanta newspaper editor Henry W. Grady in 1885 to produce the racist idea of "separate but equal," when he knew southern communities were hardly separate or equal? What caused think tankers after the presidential election of Barack Obama in 2008 to produce the racist idea of a postracial society, when they knew all those studies had documented discrimination? Time and again, racist ideas have not been cooked up from the boiling pot of ignorance and hate. Time and again, powerful and brilliant men and women have produced racist ideas in order to justify the racist policies of their era, in order to redirect the blame for their era's racial disparities away from those policies and onto Black people.

I was taught the popular folktale of racism: that ignorant and hateful people had produced racist ideas, and that these racist people had instituted racist policies. But when I learned the motives behind the production of many of America's most influentially racist ideas, it became quite obvious that this folktale, though sensible, was not based on a firm footing of historical evidence. Ignorance/hate→racist ideas→discrimination: this causal relationship is largely ahistorical. It has actually been the inverse relationship—racial discrimination led to racist ideas which led to ignorance and hate. Racial discrimination→racist ideas→ignorance/hate: this is the causal relationship driving America's history of race relations.

Their own racist ideas usually did *not* dictate the decisions of the most powerful Americans when they instituted, defended, and tolerated discriminatory policies that affected millions of Black lives over the course of American history. Racially discriminatory policies have usually sprung from economic, political, and cultural self-interests,

self-interests that are constantly changing. Politicians seeking higher office have primarily created and defended discriminatory policies out of political self-interest—not racist ideas. Capitalists seeking to increase profit margins have primarily created and defended discriminatory policies out of economic self-interest—not racist ideas. Cultural professionals, including theologians, artists, scholars, and journalists, were seeking to advance their careers or cultures and have primarily created and defended discriminatory policies out of professional self-interest—not racist ideas.

When we look back on our history, we often wonder why so many Americans did not resist slave trading, enslaving, segregating, or now, mass incarcerating. The reason is, again, racist ideas. The principal function of racist ideas in American history has been the suppression of resistance to racial discrimination and its resulting racial disparities. The beneficiaries of slavery, segregation, and mass incarceration have produced racist ideas of Black people being best suited for or deserving of the confines of slavery, segregation, or the jail cell. Consumers of these racist ideas have been led to believe there is something wrong with Black people, and not the policies that have enslaved, oppressed, and confined so many Black people.

Racist ideas have done their job on us. We have a hard time recognizing that racial discrimination is the sole cause of racial disparities in this country and in the world at large. I write *we* for a reason. When I began this book, with a heavy heart for Trayvon Martin and Rekia Boyd, I must confess that I held quite a few racist ideas. Even though I am an Africana studies historian and have been tutored all my life in egalitarian spaces, I held racist notions of Black inferiority before researching and writing this book. Racist ideas are ideas. Anyone can produce them or consume them, as *Stamped from the Beginning's* interracial cast of producers and consumers show. Anyone—Whites, Latina/os, Blacks, Asians, Native Americans—anyone can express the idea that Black people are inferior, that something is wrong with Black people. Anyone can believe both racist and antiracist ideas, that certain things are wrong with Black people and other things are equal. Fooled by racist ideas, I did not fully realize that the only thing wrong with Black

people is that we think something is wrong with Black people. I did not fully realize that the only thing extraordinary about White people is that they think something is extraordinary about White people.

I am not saying all individuals who happen to identify as Black (or White or Latina/o or Asian or Native American) are equal in all ways. I am saying that there is nothing wrong with Black people *as a group*, or with any other racial group. That is what it truly means to think as an antiracist: to think there is nothing wrong with Black people, to think that racial groups are equal. There are lazy and unwise and harmful individuals of African ancestry. There are lazy and unwise and harmful individuals of European ancestry. There are industrious and wise and harmless individuals of European ancestry. There are industrious and wise and harmless individuals of African ancestry. But no racial group has ever had a monopoly on any type of human trait or gene—not now, not ever. Under our different-looking hair and skin, doctors cannot tell the difference between our bodies, our brains, or the blood that runs in our veins. All cultures, in all their behavioral differences, are on the same level. Black Americans' history of oppression has made Black opportunities—not Black people—inferior.

When you truly believe that the racial groups are equal, then you also believe that racial disparities must be the result of racial discrimination. Committed to this antiracist idea of group equality, I was able to self-critique, discover, and shed the racist ideas I had consumed over my lifetime while I uncovered and exposed the racist ideas that others have produced over the lifetime of America. I know that readers truly committed to racial equality will join me on this journey of interrogating and shedding our racist ideas. But if there is anything I have learned during my research, it's that the principal producers and defenders of racist ideas will not join us. And no logic or fact or history book can change them, because logic and facts and scholarship have little to do with why they are expressing racist ideas in the first place. *Stamped from the Beginning* is about these closed-minded, cunning, captivating producers of racist ideas. But it is not for them.

My open mind was liberated in writing this story. I am hoping that other open minds can be liberated in reading this story.