

# INTRODUCTION



DEAR READER,

To know the past is to know the present. To know the present is to know yourself.

I write about the history of racism to understand racism today. I want to understand racism today to understand how it is affecting me today. I want you to understand racism today to understand how it is affecting you and America today.

The book you're holding is a remix of my book, *Stamped from the Beginning*, a narrative history of racist and antiracist ideas. A racist idea is any idea that suggests something is wrong or right, superior or inferior, better or worse about a racial group. An antiracist idea is any idea that suggests that racial groups are equals. Racist and antiracist ideas have lived in human minds for nearly six hundred years. Born in western Europe in

Letter to Readers from  
Ibram + Kendi

in *Stamped: Racism, Anti-Racism  
and you*

by Jason Reynolds +  
Ibram X Kendi

the mid-1400s, racist ideas traveled to colonial America and have lived in the United States from its beginning. I chronicled their entire life in *Stamped from the Beginning*.

The novelist Jason Reynolds adapted *Stamped from the Beginning* into this book for you. I wish I learned this history at your age. But there were no books telling the complete story of racist ideas. Some books told parts of the story. I hardly wanted to read them, though. Most were so boring, written in ways I could not relate to. But not Jason's books. Not this book. Jason is one of the most gifted writers and thinkers of our time. I don't know of anyone who would have been better at connecting the past to the present for you. Jason is a great writer in the purest sense. A great writer snatches the human eye in the way that a thumping beat snatches the human ear, makes your head bob up and down. It is hard to stop when the beat is on. A great writer makes my head bob from side to side. It is hard to stop when the book is open.

I don't think I'm a great writer like Jason, but I do think I'm a courageous writer. I wrote *Stamped from the Beginning* with my cell phone on, with my television on, with my anger on, with my joy on—always thinking on and on. I watched the televised and untelevised life of the

stormiest nights. I watched the televised and untelevised killings of unarmed Black human beings at the hands of cops and wannabe cops. I somehow managed to write *Stamped from the Beginning* between the heartbreaking deaths of seventeen-year-old Trayvon Martin and seventeen-year-old Darnesha Harris and twelve-year-old Tamir Rice and sixteen-year-old Kimani Gray and eighteen-year-old Michael Brown, heartbreaks that are a product of America's history of racist ideas as much as a history of racist ideas is a product of these heartbreaks.

Meaning, if not for racist ideas, George Zimmerman would not have thought the hooded Florida teen who liked LeBron James, hip-hop, and *South Park* had to be a robber. Zimmerman's racist ideas in 2012 transformed an easygoing Trayvon Martin walking home from a 7-Eleven holding watermelon juice and Skittles into a menace to society holding danger. Racist ideas cause people to look at an innocent Black face and see a criminal. If not for racist ideas, Trayvon would still be alive. His dreams of becoming a pilot would still be alive.

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. Black people are *five times* more likely to be incarcerated than Whites.

I'm no math whiz, but if Black people make up 13 percent of the US population, then Black people should make up somewhere close to 13 percent of the Americans killed by the police, and somewhere close to 13 percent of the Americans sitting in prisons. But today, the United States remains nowhere close to racial equality. African Americans make up 40 percent of the incarcerated population. These are racial inequities, older than the life of the United States.

Even before Thomas Jefferson and the other founders declared independence in 1776, Americans were arguing over racial inequities, 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 groups involved in this heated argument. Both segregationists and assimilationists, as I call these racist positions in *Stamped from the Beginning*, think Black people are to blame for racial inequity. Both the segregationists and the assimilationists think there is something wrong with Black people and that's why

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Black people are on the lower and dying end of racial inequity. The assimilationists believe Black people as a group can be changed for the better, and the segregationists do not. The segregationists and the assimilationists are challenged by *antiracists*. The antiracists say there is nothing wrong or right about Black people and everything wrong with racism. The antiracists say racism is the problem in need of changing, not Black people. The antiracists try to transform racism. The assimilationists try to transform Black people. The segregationists try to get away from Black people. These are the three distinct racial positions you will hear throughout *Stamped: Racism, Antiracism, and You*—the segregationists, the assimilationists, and the antiracists, and how they each have rationalized racial inequity.

In writing *Stamped from the Beginning*, I did not want to just write about racist ideas. I wanted to discover the *source* of racist ideas. When I was in school and first really learning about racism, I was taught the popular origin story. I was taught 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 racist ideas, it became obvious that this

folktale, though sensible, was not true. I found that the need of powerful people to defend racist policies that benefited them led them to produce racist ideas, and when unsuspecting people consumed these racist ideas, they became ignorant and hateful.

Think of it this way. There are only two potential explanations for racial inequity, for why White people were free and Black people were enslaved in the United States. Either racist policies forced Black people into enslavement, or animalistic Black people were fit for slavery. Now, if you make a lot of money enslaving people, then to defend your business you want people to believe that Black people are fit for slavery. You will produce and circulate this racist idea to stop abolitionists from challenging slavery, from abolishing what is making you rich. You see the racist policies of slavery arrive first and then racist ideas follow to justify slavery. And these racist ideas make people ignorant about racism and hateful of racial groups.

When I began writing *Stamped from the Beginning*, I must confess that I held quite a few racist ideas. Yes, me. I'm an African American. I'm a historian of African Americans. But it's important to remember that racist ideas are ideas. Anyone can produce them or consume

them, as this book shows. I thought there were certain things wrong with Black people (and other racial groups). 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. There are lazy, hardworking, wise, unwise, harmless, and harmful *individuals* of every race, but no racial *group* is better or worse than another racial group in any way.

Committed to this antiracist idea of group equality, I was able to discover, self-critique, 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. The first step to building an antiracist America is acknowledging America's racist past. By acknowledging America's racist past, we can acknowledge America's racist present. In acknowledging America's racist present, we can work toward building an antiracist America. An antiracist America where no racial group has more or less, or is thought of as more or less. An antiracist America where the people no longer hate on racial groups or try to change racial groups. An



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antiracist America where our skin color is as irrelevant as the colors of the clothes over our skin.

And an antiracist America is sure to come. No power lasts forever. There will come a time when Americans will *realize* that the only thing wrong with Black people is that they think something is wrong with Black people. There will come a time when racist ideas will no longer obstruct us from seeing the complete and utter abnormality of racial disparities. There will come a time when we will love humanity, when we will gain the courage to fight for an equitable society for our beloved humanity, knowing, intelligently, that when we fight for humanity, we are fighting for ourselves. There will come a time. Maybe, just maybe, that time is now.

In solidarity,

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a large, stylized 'I' and 'K' with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

*Ibram X. Kendi*

