

# **STAMPED FROM THE BEGINNING**

*The Definitive History of  
Racist Ideas in America*

Ibram X. Kendi



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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.<sup>1</sup>

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.<sup>2</sup>

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."<sup>3</sup>

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."<sup>4</sup>

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."<sup>5</sup>

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.<sup>6</sup>

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. 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.

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), our 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 “imbrued” 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 post-racial 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 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.

# Human Hierarchy

THEY WEATHERED BRUTAL WINTERS, suffered diseases, and learned to cope with the resisting Native Americans. But nothing brought more destruction to Puritan settlements than the Great Hurricane of 1635. On August 16, 1635, the hurricane—today judged to be perhaps Category 3—thundered up the Atlantic Coast, brushing Jamestown and passing over eastern Long Island. The storm's eye glanced at Providence to the east and moved inland, snatching up thousands of trees like weeds. In the seven-year-old Massachusetts Bay Colony, the hurricane smashed down English homes as if they were ants, before reaching the Atlantic Ocean and swinging knockout waves onto the New England shores.

Large ships from England transporting settlers and supplies were sitting ducks. Seamen anchored one ship, the *Jamies*, off the coast of New Hampshire to wait out the hurricane. Suddenly, a powerful wave sliced the ship's anchors and cables like an invisible knife. Seamen slashed the third cable in distress and hoisted sail to cruise back out to a safer sea. The winds smashed the new sail into "rotten rags," recorded notable Puritan minister Richard Mather in his diary. As the rags disappeared into the ocean, so did hope.

Abducted now by the hurricane, the ship headed toward a mighty rock. All seemed lost. Richard Mather and fellow passengers cried out to the Lord for deliverance. Using "his own immediate good hand," God guided the ship around the mighty rock, Mather later testified. The sea calmed. The crew hurriedly rigged the ship with new sails. The Lord blew "a fresh gale of wind," allowing the captain to navigate



away from danger. The battered *James* arrived in Boston on August 17, 1635. All one hundred passengers credited God for their survival. Richard Mather took the deliverance as a charge "to walk uprightly before him as long as we live."

As a Puritan minister, Richard Mather had walked uprightly through fifteen years of British persecution before embarking on the perilous journey across the Atlantic to begin life anew in New England. There, he would be reunited with his illustrious ministerial friend John Cotton, who had faced British persecution for twenty years in Boston, England. In 1630, Cotton had given the farewell sermon to hundreds of Puritan founders of New England communities, blessing their fulfillment of God's prophetic vision. As dissenters from the Church of England, Puritans believed themselves to be God's chosen piece of humanity, a special, superior people, and New England, their Israel, was to be their exceptional land.<sup>2</sup>

Within a week of the Great Hurricane, Richard Mather was installed as pastor of Dorchester's North Church near the renowned North Church of the new Boston, which was pastored by John Cotton. Mather and Cotton then embarked on a sacred mission to create, articulate, and defend the *New England Way*. They used their pens as much as their pulpits, and they used their power as much as their pens and pulpits. They penned the colonies' first adult and children's books as part of this endeavor. Mather, in all likelihood, steered the selection of Henry Dunster to lead colonial America's first college, Harvard's forerunner, in 1640. And Cotton did not mind when Dunster fashioned Harvard's curriculum after their alma mater, Cambridge, setting off an ideological trend. Like the founders of Cambridge and Harvard before them, the founders of William & Mary (1693), Yale (1701), the University of Pennsylvania (1740), Princeton (1746), Columbia (1754), Brown (1764), Rutgers (1766), and Dartmouth (1769)—the other eight colonial colleges—regarded ancient Greek and Latin literature as universal truths worthy of memorization and unworthy of critique. At the center of the Old and New England Greek library hailed the resurrected Aristotle, who had come under suspicion as a threat to doctrine among some factions in Christianity during the medieval period.<sup>3</sup>

In studying Aristotle's philosophy, Puritans learned rationales for human hierarchy, and they began to believe that some groups were superior to other groups. In Aristotle's case, ancient Greeks were superior to all non-Greeks. But Puritans believed they were superior to Native Americans, the African people, and even Anglicans—that is, all non-Puritans. Aristotle, who lived from 384 to 322 BCE, concocted a climate theory to justify Greek superiority, saying that extreme hot or cold climates produced intellectually, physically, and morally inferior people who were ugly and lacked the capacity for freedom and self-government. Aristotle labeled Africans "burnt faces"—the original meaning in Greek of "Ethiopian"—and viewed the "ugly" extremes of pale or dark skins as the effect of the extreme cold or hot climates. All of this was in the interest of normalizing Greek slaveholding practices and Greece's rule over the western Mediterranean. Aristotle situated the Greeks, in their supreme, intermediate climate, as the most beautifully endowed superior rulers and enslavers of the world. "Humankind is divided into two: the masters and the slaves; or, if one prefers it, the Greeks and the Barbarians, those who have the right to command and those who are born to obey," Aristotle said. For him, the enslaved peoples were "by nature incapable of reasoning and live a life of pure sensation, like certain tribes on the borders of the civilized world, or like people who are diseased through the onset of illnesses like epilepsy or madness."<sup>4</sup>

By the birth of Christ or the start of the Common Era, Romans were justifying their slaveholding practices using Aristotle's climate theory and soon the new Christianity began to contribute to these arguments. For early Christian theologians—whom Puritans studied alongside Aristotle—God ordained the human hierarchy. St. Paul introduced, in the first century, a three-tiered hierarchy of slave relations—heavenly master (top), earthly master (middle), enslaved (bottom). "He who was free when called is a slave of Christ," he testified in 1 Corinthians. "Slaves" were to "obey in everything those that are your earthly masters, not with eyeservice as men-pleasers, but in singleness of heart, fearing the Lord." In a crucial caveat in Galatians 3:28, St. Paul equalized the souls of masters and slaves as "all one in Christ Jesus."

All in all, ethnic and religious and color prejudice existed in the ancient world. Constructions of *niccs*—White Europe, Black Africa, for instance—did not, and therefore racist ideas did not. But crucially the foundations of race and racist ideas were laid. And so were the foundations for egalitarianism, antiracism, and antislavery laid in Greco-Roman antiquity. “The deity gave liberty to all men, and nature created no one a slave,” wrote Alkidamas, Aristotle’s rival in Athens. When Herodotus, the foremost historian of ancient Greece, traveled up the Nile River he found the Nubians “the most handsome of peoples.” Lactantius, an adviser to Constantine I, the first Christian Roman emperor, announced early in the fourth century: “God who creates and inspires men wished them all to be fair, that is, equal.” St. Augustine, an African church father in the fourth and fifth centuries, maintained that “whoever is born anywhere as a human being, that is, as a rational mortal creature, however strange he may appear to our senses in bodily form or colour or motion or utterance, or in any faculty, part or quality of his nature whatsoever, let no true believer have any doubt that such an individual is descended from the one man who was first created.” However, these antislavery and egalitarian champions did not accompany Aristotle and St. Paul into the modern era, into the new Harvard curriculum, or into the New England mind seeking to justify slavery and the racial hierarchy it produced.<sup>5</sup>

When John Cotton drafted New England’s first constitution in 1636, *Aloisius his indiculis* he legalized the enslavement of captives taken in just wars as well as such strangers as willingly sell themselves or are sold to us. The New England way imitated the Old England way on slavery. Cotton reproduced the policies of his British peers close and far away. In 1636, Barbados officials announced that “Negroes and *Indians* that come here to be sold, should serve for Life, unless a Contract was before made to the contrary.”<sup>6</sup>

The Pequot War, the first major war between the New England colonists and the areas indigenous peoples, erupted in 1637. Captain William Pierce forced some indigenous war captives onto the *Desire*, the first slaver to leave British North America. The ship sailed to the Isla de Providencia off Nicaragua, where “Negroes” were reportedly

“being . . . kept as perpetuall servants.” Massachusetts governor John Winthrop recorded Captain Pierce’s historic arrival back into Boston in 1638, noting that his ship was hauling “salt, cotton, tobacco and Negroes.”

The first generation of Puritans began rationalizing the enslavement of these “Negroes” without skipping a Christian beat. Their chilling nightmares of persecution were not the only hallucinations the Puritans had carried over the Atlantic waters in their minds to America. From the first ships that landed in Virginia in 1607, to the ships that survived the Great Hurricane of 1635, to the first slave ships, some British settlers of colonial America carried across the sea Puritan, biblical, scientific, and Aristotelian rationalizations of slavery and human hierarchy. From Western Europe and the new settlements in Latin America, some Puritans carried across their judgment of the many African peoples as one inferior people. They carried across racist ideas—racist ideas that preceded American slavery, because the need to justify African slavery preceded colonial America.

AFTER ARAB MUSLIMS conquered parts of North Africa, Portugal, and Spain during the seventh century, Christians and Muslims battled for centuries over the prize of Mediterranean supremacy. Meanwhile, below the Sahara Desert, the West African empires of Ghana (700–1200), Mali (1200–1500), and Songhay (1350–1600) were situated at the crossroads of the lucrative trade routes for gold and salt. A robust trans-Saharan trade emerged, allowing Europeans to obtain West African goods through Muslim intermediaries.

Ghana, Mali, and Songhay developed empires that could rival in size, power, scholarship, and wealth any in the world. Intellectuals at universities in Timbuktu and Jenne pumped out scholarship and pumped in students from around West Africa. Songhay grew to be the largest. Mali may have been the most illustrious. The world’s greatest globe-trotter of the fourteenth century, who trotted from North Africa to Eastern Europe to Eastern Asia, decided to see Mali for himself in 1352. “There is complete security in their country,” Moroccan

Ibn Battuta marveled in his travel notes. "Neither traveler nor inhabitant in it has anything to fear from robbers or men of violence."<sup>10</sup>

Ibn Battuta was an oddity—an abhorred oddity—among the Islamic intelligentsia in Fez, Morocco. Hardly any scholars had traveled far from home, and Battuta's travel accounts threatened their own armchair credibility in depicting foreigners. None of Battuta's antagonists was more influential than the intellectual tower of the Muslim world at that time, Tunisian Ibn Khaldun, who arrived in Fez just as Battuta returned from Mali. "People in the dynasty [in official positions] whispered to each other that he must be a liar." Khaldun revealed in 1377 in *The Muqaddimah*, the foremost Islamic history of the premodern world. Khaldun then painted a very different picture of sub-Saharan Africa in *The Muqaddimah*: "The Negro nations are, as a rule, submissive to slavery." Khaldun surmised, "because [Negroes] have little that is [essentially] human and possess attributes that are quite similar to those of dumb animals." And the "same applies to the Slavs," argued this disciple of Aristotle. Following Greek and Roman justifiers, Khaldun used climate theory to justify Islamic enslavement of sub-Saharan Africans and Eastern European Slavs—groups sharing only one obvious characteristic: their remoteness. "All their conditions are remote from those of human beings and close to those of wild animals," Khaldun suggested. Their inferior conditions were neither permanent nor hereditary, however. "Negroes" who migrated to the cooler north were "found to produce descendants whose colour gradually turns white," Khaldun stressed. Dark-skinned people had the capacity for *physical* assimilation in a colder climate. Later, cultural assimilationists would imagine that culturally inferior African people, placed in the proper European cultural environment, could or should adopt European culture. But first physical assimilationists like Khaldun imagined that physically inferior African people, placed in the proper cold environment, could or should adopt European physicality: white skin and straight hair.<sup>11</sup>

Ibn Khaldun did not intend merely to demean African people as inferior. He intended to belittle all the different-looking African and Slavic peoples whom the Muslims were trading as slaves. Even

so, he reinforced the conceptual foundation for racist ideas. On the eve of the fifteenth century, Khaldun helped bolster the foundation for assimilationist ideas, for racist notions of the environment producing African inferiority. All an enslaver had to do was to stop justifying Slavic slavery and inferiority using climate theory and focus the theory on African people, for the racist attitude toward dark-skinned people to be complete.

There was one enslavement theory focused on Black people already circulating, a theory somehow derived from Genesis 9:18–29 which said "that Negroes were the children of Ham, the son of Noah, and that they were singled out to be black as the result of Noah's curse, which produced Ham's colour and the slavery God inflicted upon his descendants," as Khaldun explained. The lineage of this curse of Ham theory curves back through the great Persian scholar Tabari (838–923) all the way to Islamic and Hebrew sources. God had permanently cursed ugly Blackness and slavery into the very nature of African people, curse theorists maintained. As strictly a climate theorist, Khaldun discarded the "silly story" of the curse of Ham.<sup>12</sup>

Although it clearly supposed Black inferiority, the curse theory was like an unelected politician during the medieval period. Muslim and Christian enslavers hardly gave credence to the curse theory; they enslaved too many non-Black descendants of Shem and Japheth, Ham's supposed non-cursed brothers, for that. But the medieval curse theorists laid the foundation for segregationist ideas and for racist notions of Black genetic inferiority. The shift to solely enslaving Black people and justifying it using the curse of Ham, was in the offing. Once that shift occurred, the disempowered curse theory became empowered, and racist ideas truly came into being.<sup>13</sup>