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**HOW TO
BE AN
ANTIRACIST**

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MY RACIST INTRODUCTION

DESPISED SUITS AND ties. For seventeen years I had been surrounded by suit-wearing, tie-choking, hat-flying church folk. My teenage wardrobe hollered the defiance of a preacher's kid.

It was January 17, 2000. More than three thousand Black people—with a smattering of White folks—arrived that Monday morning in their Sunday best at the Hylton Memorial Chapel in Northern Virginia. My parents arrived in a state of shock. Their floundering son had somehow made it to the final round of the Prince William County Martin Luther King Jr. oratorical contest.

I didn't show up with a white collar under a dark suit and matching dark tie like most of my competitors. I sported a racy golden-brown blazer with a slick black shirt and bright color-streaked tie underneath. The hem of my baggy black slacks crested over my creamy boots. I'd already failed the test of respectability before I opened my mouth, but my parents, Carol and Larry, were all smiles nonetheless. They couldn't remember the last time they saw me wearing a tie and blazer, however loud and crazy.

But it wasn't just my clothes that didn't fit the scene. My com-

petitors were academic prodigies. I wasn't. I carried a GPA lower than 3.0; my SAT score barely cracked 1000. Colleges were recruiting my competitors. I was riding the high of having received surprise admission letters from the two colleges I'd halfheartedly applied to.

A few weeks before, I was on the basketball court with my high school team, warming up for a home game, cycling through layup lines. My father, all six foot three and two hundred pounds of him, emerged from my high school gym's entrance. He slowly walked onto the basketball court, flailing his long arms to get my attention—and embarrassing me before what we could call the “White judge.” Classic Dad. He couldn't care less what judgmental White people thought about him. He rarely if ever put on a happy mask, faked a calmer voice, hid his opinion, or avoided making a scene. I loved and hated my father for living on his own terms in a world that usually denies Black people their own terms. It was the sort of defiance that could have gotten him lynched by a mob in a different time and place—or lynched by men in badges today.

I jogged over to him before he could flail his way right into our layup lines. Weirdly giddy, he handed me a brown manila envelope.

“This came for you today.”

He motioned me to open the envelope, right there at half-court as the White students and teachers looked on.

I pulled out the letter and read it: I had been admitted to Hampton University in southern Virginia. My immediate shock exploded into unspeakable happiness. I embraced Dad and exhaled. Tears mixed with warm-up sweat on my face. The judging White eyes around us faded.

I thought I was stupid, too dumb for college. Of course, intelligence is as subjective as beauty. But I kept using “objective” standards, like test scores and report cards, to judge myself. No wonder I sent out only two college applications: one to Hampton and the other to the institution I ended up attending, Florida A&M University. Fewer applications meant less rejection—and I

fully expected those two historically Black universities to reject me. Why would any university want an idiot on their campus who can't understand Shakespeare? It never occurred to me that maybe I wasn't really trying to understand Shakespeare and that's why I dropped out of my English II International Baccalaureate class during my senior year. Then again, I did not read much of anything in those years.

Maybe if I'd read history then, I'd have learned about the historical significance of the new town my family had moved to from New York City in 1997. I would have learned about all those Confederate memorials surrounding me in Manassas, Virginia, like Robert E. Lee's dead army. I would have learned why so many tourists trek to Manassas National Battlefield Park to relive the glory of the Confederate victories at the Battles of Bull Run during the Civil War. It was there that General Thomas J. Jackson acquired his nickname, “Stonewall,” for his stubborn defense of the Confederacy. Northern Virginians kept the stonewall intact after all these years. Did anyone notice the irony that at this Martin Luther King Jr. oratorical contest, my free Black life represented Stonewall Jackson High School?

THE DELIGHTFUL EVENT organizers from Delta Sigma Theta sorority, the proud dignitaries, and the competitors were all seated on the pulpit. (The group was too large to say we were seated in the pulpit.) The audience sat in rows that curved around the long, arched pulpit, giving room for speakers to pace to the far sides of the chapel while delivering their talks; five stairs also allowed us to descend into the crowd if we wanted.

The middle schoolers had given their surprisingly mature speeches. The exhilarating children's choir had sung behind us. The audience sat back down and went silent in anticipation of the three high school orators.

I went first, finally approaching the climax of an experience that had already changed my life. From winning my high school competition months before to winning “best before the judges”

at a countywide competition weeks before—I felt a special rainstorm of academic confidence. If I came out of the experience dripping with confidence for college, then I'd entered from a high school drought. Even now I wonder if it was my poor sense of self that first generated my poor sense of my people. Or was it my poor sense of my people that inflamed a poor sense of myself? Like the famous question about the chicken and the egg, the answer is less important than the cycle it describes. Racist ideas make people of color think less of themselves, which makes them more vulnerable to racist ideas. Racist ideas make White people think more of themselves, which further attracts them to racist ideas.

I thought I was a subpar student and was bombarded by messages—from Black people, White people, the media—that told me that the reason was rooted in my race . . . which made me more discouraged and less motivated as a student . . . which only further reinforced for me the racist idea that Black people just weren't very studious . . . which made me feel even more despair or indifference . . . and on it went. At no point was this cycle interrupted by a deeper analysis of my own specific circumstances and shortcomings or a critical look at the ideas of the society that judged me—instead, the cycle hardened the racist ideas inside me until I was ready to preach them to others.

I REMEMBER THE MLK competition so fondly. But when I recall the racist speech I gave, I flush with shame.

"What would be Dr. King's message for the millennium? Let's visualize an angry seventy-one-year-old Dr. King . . ." And I began my remix of King's "I Have a Dream" speech.

It was joyous, I started, our emancipation from enslavement. But "now, one hundred thirty-five years later, the Negro is still not free." I was already thundering, my tone angry, more Malcolm than Martin. "Our youth's minds are still in captivity!"

I did not say our youth's minds are in captivity of racist ideas, as I would say now.

"They think it's okay to be those who are most feared in our society!" I said, as if it was their fault they were so feared.

"They think it's okay not to think!" I charged, raising the classic racist idea that Black youth don't value education as much as their non-Black counterparts. No one seemed to care that this well-traveled idea had flown on anecdotes but had never been grounded in proof. Still, the crowd encouraged me with their applause. I kept shooting out unproven and disproven racist ideas about all the things wrong with Black youth—ironically, on the day when all the things right about Black youth were on display.

I started pacing wildly back and forth on the runway for the pulpit, gaining momentum.

"They think it's okay to climb the high tree of pregnancy!" Applause. "They think it's okay to confine their dreams to sports and music!" Applause.

Had I forgotten that I—not "Black youth"—was the one who had confined his dreams to sports? And I was calling Black youth "they"? Who on earth did I think I was? Apparently, my placement on that illustrious stage had lifted me out of the realm of ordinary—and thus inferior—Black youngsters and into the realm of the rare and extraordinary.

In my applause-stoked flights of oratory, I didn't realize that to say something is wrong about a racial group is to say something is inferior about that racial group. I did not realize that to say something is inferior about a racial group is to say a racist idea. I thought I was serving my people, when in fact I was serving up racist ideas about my people to my people. The Black judge seemed to be eating it up and clapping me on my back for more. I kept giving more.

"Their minds are being held captive, and our adults' minds are right there beside them," I said, motioning to the floor. "Because they somehow think that the cultural revolution that began on the day of my dream's birth is over.

"How can it be over when many times we are unsuccessful because we lack intestinal fortitude?" Applause.

"How can it be over when our kids leave their houses not

knowing how to make themselves, only knowing how to not make themselves?" Applause.

"How can it be over if all of this is happening in our community?" I asked, lowering my voice. "So I say to you, my friends, that even though this cultural revolution may never be over, I still have a dream . . ."

I STILL HAVE a nightmare—the memory of this speech whenever I muster the courage to recall it anew. It is hard for me to believe I finished high school in the year 2000 touting so many racist ideas. A racist culture had handed me the ammunition to shoot Black people, to shoot myself, and I took and used it. Internalized racism is the real Black on Black crime.

I was a dupe, a chump who saw the ongoing struggles of Black people on MLK Day 2000 and decided that Black people themselves were the problem. This is the consistent function of racist ideas—and of any kind of bigotry more broadly: to manipulate us into seeing people as the problem, instead of the policies that ensnare them.

The language used by the forty-fifth president of the United States offers a clear example of how this sort of racist language and thinking works. Long before he became president, Donald Trump liked to say, "Laziness is a trait in Blacks." When he decided to run for president, his plan for making America great again: defaming Latinx immigrants as mostly criminals and rapists and demanding billions for a border wall to block them. He promised "a total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States." Once he became president, he routinely called his Black critics "stupid." He claimed immigrants from Haiti "all have AIDS," while praising White supremacists as "very fine people" in the summer of 2017.

Through it all, whenever someone pointed out the obvious, Trump responded with variations on a familiar refrain: "No, no. I'm not a racist. I'm the least racist person that you have ever interviewed," that "you've ever met," that "you've ever encoun-

tered." Trump's behavior may be exceptional, but his denials are normal. When racist ideas resound, denials that those ideas are racist typically follow. When racist policies resound, denials that those policies are racist also follow.

Denial is the heartbeat of racism, beating across ideologies, races, and nations. It is beating within us. Many of us who strongly call out Trump's racist ideas will strongly deny our own. How often do we become reflexively defensive when someone calls something we've done or said racist? How many of us would agree with this statement: "Racist" isn't a descriptive word. It's a pejorative word. It is the equivalent of saying, 'I don't like you.'" These are actually the words of White supremacist Richard Spencer, who, like Trump, identifies as "not racist." How many of us who despise the Trumps and White supremacists of the world share their self-definition of "not racist"?

What's the problem with being "not racist"? It is a claim that signifies neutrality: "I am not a racist, but neither am I aggressively against racism." But there is no neutrality in the racism struggle. The opposite of "racist" isn't "not racist." It is "antiracist." What's the difference? One endorses either the idea of a racial hierarchy as a racist, or racial equality as an antiracist. One either believes problems are rooted in groups of people, as a racist, or locates the roots of problems in power and policies, as an antiracist. One either allows racial inequities to persevere, as a racist, or confronts racial inequities, as an antiracist. There is no in-between safe space of "not racist." The claim of "not racist" neutrality is a mask for racism. This may seem harsh, but it's important at the outset that we apply one of the core principles of antiracism, which is to return the word "racist" itself back to its proper usage. "Racist" is not—as Richard Spencer argues—a pejorative. It is not the worst word in the English language; it is not the equivalent of a slur. It is descriptive, and the only way to undo racism is to consistently identify and describe it—and then dismantle it. The attempt to turn this usefully descriptive term into an almost unusable slur is, of course, designed to do the opposite: to freeze us into inaction.

THE COMMON IDEA of claiming “color blindness” is akin to the notion of being “not racist”—as with the “not racist,” the color-blind individual, by ostensibly failing to see race, fails to see racism and falls into racist passivity. The language of color blindness—like the language of “not racist”—is a mask to hide racism. “Our Constitution is color-blind,” U.S. Supreme Court Justice John Harlan proclaimed in his dissent to *Plessy v. Ferguson*, the case that legalized Jim Crow segregation in 1896. “The white race deems itself to be the dominant race in this country,” Justice Harlan went on. “I doubt not, it will continue to be for all time, if it remains true to its great heritage.” A color-blind Constitution for a White-supremacist America.

THE GOOD NEWS is that racist and antiracist are not fixed identities. We can be a racist one minute and an antiracist the next. What we say about race, what we do about race, in each moment, determines what—not who—we are.

I used to be racist most of the time. I am changing. I am no longer identifying with racists by claiming to be “not racist.” I am no longer speaking through the mask of racial neutrality. I am no longer manipulated by racist ideas to see racial groups as problems. I no longer believe a Black person cannot be racist. I am no longer policing my every action around an imagined White or Black judge, trying to convince White people of my equal humanity, trying to convince Black people I am representing the race well. I no longer care about how the actions of other Black individuals reflect on me, since none of us are race representatives, nor is any individual responsible for someone else’s racist ideas. And I’ve come to see that the movement from racist to antiracist is always ongoing—it requires understanding and snubbing racism based on biology, ethnicity, body, culture, behavior, color, space, and class. And beyond that, it means standing ready to fight at racism’s intersections with other bigotries.

THIS BOOK IS ultimately about the basic struggle we’re all in, the struggle to be fully human and to see that others are fully human. I share my own journey of being raised in the dueling racial consciousness of the Reagan-era Black middle class, then right-turning onto the ten-lane highway of anti-Black racism—a highway mysteriously free of police and free on gas—and veering off onto the two-lane highway of anti-White racism, where gas is rare and police are everywhere, before finding and turning down the unlit dirt road of antiracism.

After taking this grueling journey to the dirt road of antiracism, humanity can come upon the clearing of a potential future: an antiracist world in all its imperfect beauty. It can become real if we focus on power instead of people, if we focus on changing policy instead of groups of people. It’s possible if we overcome our cynicism about the permanence of racism.

We know how to be racist. We know how to pretend to be not racist. Now let’s know how to be antiracist.

CHAPTER 1

DEFINITIONS

RACIST: One who is supporting a racist policy through their actions or inaction or expressing a racist idea.

ANTIRACIST: One who is supporting an antiracist policy through their actions or expressing an antiracist idea.

SOUL LIBERATION SWAYED onstage at the University of Illinois arena, rocking colorful dashikis and Afros that shot up like balled fists—an amazing sight to behold for the eleven thousand college students in the audience. Soul Liberation appeared nothing like the White ensembles in suits who'd been sounding hymns for nearly two days after Jesus's birthday in 1970.

Black students had succeeded in pushing the InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, the U.S. evangelical movement's premier college organizer, to devote the second night of the conference to Black theology. More than five hundred Black attendees from across the country were on hand as Soul Liberation began to perform. Two of those Black students were my parents.

They were not sitting together. Days earlier, they had ridden on the same bus for twenty-four hours that felt like forty-two, from Manhattan through Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Indiana, before arriving in central Illinois. One hundred Black New Yorkers converged on InterVarsity's Urbana '70.

My mother and father had met during the Thanksgiving break weeks earlier when Larry, an accounting student at Man-

hattan's Baruch College, co-organized a recruiting event for Urbana '70 at his church in Jamaica, Queens. Carol was one of the thirty people who showed up—she had come home to Queens from Nyack College, a small Christian school about forty-five miles north of her parents' home in Far Rockaway. The first meeting was uneventful, but Carol noticed Larry, an overly serious student with a towering Afro, his face hidden behind a forest of facial hair, and Larry noticed Carol, a petite nineteen-year-old with dark freckles sprayed over her caramel complexion, even if all they did was exchange small talk. They'd independently decided to go to Urbana '70 when they heard that Tom Skinner would be preaching and Soul Liberation would be performing. At twenty-eight years old, Skinner was growing famous as a young evangelist of Black liberation theology. A former gang member and son of a Baptist preacher, he reached thousands via his weekly radio show and tours, where he delivered sermons at packed iconic venues like the Apollo Theater in his native Harlem. In 1970, Skinner published his third and fourth books, *How Black Is the Gospel?* and *Words of Revolution*.

Carol and Larry devoured both books like a James Brown tune, like a Muhammad Ali fight. Carol had discovered Skinner through his younger brother, Johnnie, who was enrolled with her at Nyack. Larry's connection was more ideological. In the spring of 1970, he had enrolled in "The Black Aesthetic," a class taught by legendary Baruch College literary scholar Addison Gayle Jr. For the first time, Larry read James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time*, Richard Wright's *Native Son*, Amiri Baraka's wrenching plays, and the banned revolutionary manifesto *The Spook Who Sat by the Door* by Sam Greenlee. It was an awakening. After Gayle's class, Larry started searching for a way to reconcile his faith with his newfound Black consciousness. That search led him to Tom Skinner.

SOUL LIBERATION LAUNCHED into their popular anthem, "Power to the People." The bodies of the Black students who had

surged to the front of the arena started moving almost in unison with the sounds of booming drums and heavy bass that, along with the syncopated claps, generated the rhythm and blues of a rural Southern revival.

The wave of rhythm then rushed through the thousands of White bodies in the arena. Before long, they, too, were on their feet, swaying and singing along to the soulful sounds of Black power.

Every chord from Soul Liberation seemed to build up anticipation for the keynote speaker to come. When the music ended, it was time: Tom Skinner, dark-suited with a red tie, stepped behind the podium, his voice serious as he began his history lesson.

"The evangelical church . . . supported the status quo. It supported slavery; it supported segregation; it preached against any attempt of the Black man to stand on his own two feet."

Skinner shared how he came to worship an elite White Jesus Christ, who cleaned people up through "rules and regulations," a savior who prefigured Richard Nixon's vision of law and order. But one day, Skinner realized that he'd gotten Jesus wrong. Jesus wasn't in the Rotary Club and he wasn't a policeman. Jesus was a "radical revolutionary, with hair on his chest and dirt under his fingernails." Skinner's new idea of Jesus was born of and committed to a new reading of the gospel. "Any gospel that does not . . . speak to the issue of enslavement" and "injustice" and "inequality—any gospel that does not want to go where people are hungry and poverty-stricken and set them free in the name of Jesus Christ—is not the gospel."

Back in the days of Jesus, "there was a system working just like today," Skinner declared. But "Jesus was dangerous. He was dangerous because he was changing the system." The Romans locked up this "revolutionary" and "nailed him to a cross" and killed and buried him. But three days later, Jesus Christ "got up out of the grave" to bear witness to us today. "Proclaim liberation to the captives, preach sight to the blind" and "go into the world and tell men who are bound mentally, spiritually, and physically, 'The liberator has come!'"

The last line pulsed through the crowd. “The liberator has come!” Students practically leapt out of their seats in an ovation—taking on the mantle of this fresh gospel. The liberators had come.

My parents were profoundly receptive to Skinner’s call for evangelical liberators and attended a series of Black caucuses over the week of the conference that reinforced his call every night. At Urbana ’70, Ma and Dad found themselves leaving the civilizing and conserving and racist church they realized they’d been part of. They were saved into Black liberation theology and joined the churchless church of the Black Power movement. Born in the days of Malcolm X, Fannie Lou Hamer, Stokely Carmichael, and other antiracists who confronted segregationists and assimilationists in the 1950s and 1960s, the movement for Black solidarity, Black cultural pride, and Black economic and political self-determination had enraptured the entire Black world. And now, in 1970, Black power had enraptured my parents. They stopped thinking about saving Black people and started thinking about liberating Black people.

In the spring of 1971, Ma returned to Nyack College and helped form a Black student union, an organization that challenged racist theology, the Confederate flags on dorm-room doors, and the paucity of Black students and programming. She started wearing African-print dresses and wrapped her growing Afro in African-print ties. She dreamed of traveling to the motherland as a missionary.

Dad returned to his church and quit its famed youth choir. He began organizing programs that asked provocative questions: “Is Christianity the White man’s religion?” “Is the Black church relevant to the Black community?” He began reading the work of James Cone, the scholarly father of Black liberation theology and author of the influential *Black Theology & Black Power* in 1969.

One day in the spring of 1971, Dad struck up the nerve to go up to Harlem and attend Cone’s class at Union Theological Seminary. Cone lectured on his new book, *A Black Theology of Liberation*. After class, Dad approached the professor.

“What is your definition of a Christian?” Dad asked in his deeply earnest way.

Cone looked at Dad with equal seriousness and responded: “A Christian is one who is striving for liberation.”

James Cone’s working definition of a Christian described a Christianity of the enslaved, not the Christianity of the slaveholders. Receiving this definition was a revelatory moment in Dad’s life. Ma had her own similar revelation in her Black student union—that Christianity was about struggle and liberation. My parents now had, separately, arrived at a creed with which to shape their lives, to be the type of Christians that Jesus the revolutionary inspired them to be. This new definition of a word that they’d already chosen as their core identity naturally transformed them.

MY OWN, STILL-ONGOING journey toward being an antiracist began at Urbana ’70. What changed Ma and Dad led to a changing of their two unborn sons—this new definition of the Christian life became the creed that grounded my parents’ lives and the lives of their children. I cannot disconnect my parents’ religious strivings to be Christian from my secular strivings to be an antiracist. And the key act for both of us was defining our terms so that we could begin to describe the world and our place in it. Definitions anchor us in principles. This is not a light point: If we don’t do the basic work of defining the kind of people we want to be in language that is stable and consistent, we can’t work toward stable, consistent goals. Some of my most consequential steps toward being an antiracist have been the moments when I arrived at basic definitions. To be an antiracist is to set lucid definitions of racism/antiracism, racist/antiracist policies, racist/antiracist ideas, racist/antiracist people. To be a racist is to constantly redefine racist in a way that exonerates one’s changing policies, ideas, and personhood.

So let’s set some definitions. What is racism? Racism is a mar-

riage of racist policies and racist ideas that produces and normalizes racial inequities. Okay, so what are racist policies and ideas? We have to define them separately to understand why they are married and why they interact so well together. In fact, let's take one step back and consider the definition of another important phrase: racial inequity.

Racial inequity is when two or more racial groups are not standing on approximately equal footing. Here's an example of racial inequity: 71 percent of White families lived in owner-occupied homes in 2014, compared to 45 percent of Latinx families and 41 percent of Black families. Racial equity is when two or more racial groups are standing on a relatively equal footing. An example of racial equity would be if there were relatively equitable percentages of all three racial groups living in owner-occupied homes in the forties, seventies, or, better, nineties.

A racist policy is any measure that produces or sustains racial inequity between racial groups. An antiracist policy is any measure that produces or sustains racial equity between racial groups. By policy, I mean written and unwritten laws, rules, procedures, processes, regulations, and guidelines that govern people. There is no such thing as a nonracist or race-neutral policy. Every policy in every institution in every community in every nation is producing or sustaining either racial inequity or equity between racial groups.

Racist policies have been described by other terms: "institutional racism," "structural racism," and "systemic racism," for instance. But those are vaguer terms than "racist policy." When I use them I find myself having to immediately explain what they mean. "Racist policy" is more tangible and exacting, and more likely to be immediately understood by people, including its victims, who may not have the benefit of extensive fluency in racial terms. "Racist policy" says exactly what the problem is and where the problem is. "Institutional racism" and "structural racism" and "systemic racism" are redundant. Racism itself is institutional, structural, and systemic.

"Racist policy" also cuts to the core of racism better than "ra-

cial discrimination," another common phrase. "Racial discrimination" is an immediate and visible manifestation of an underlying racial policy. When someone discriminates against a person in a racial group, they are carrying out a policy or taking advantage of the lack of a protective policy. We all have the power to discriminate. Only an exclusive few have the power to make policy. Focusing on "racial discrimination" takes our eyes off the central agents of racism: racist policy and racist policymakers, or what I call racist power.

Since the 1960s, racist power has commandeered the term "racial discrimination," transforming the act of discriminating on the basis of race into an inherently racist act. But if racial discrimination is defined as treating, considering, or making a distinction in favor or against an individual based on that person's race, then racial discrimination is not inherently racist. The defining question is whether the discrimination is creating equity or inequity. If discrimination is creating equity, then it is antiracist. If discrimination is creating inequity, then it is racist. Someone reproducing inequity through permanently assisting an overrepresented racial group into wealth and power is entirely different than someone challenging that inequity by temporarily assisting an underrepresented racial group into relative wealth and power until equity is reached.

The only remedy to racist discrimination is antiracist discrimination. The only remedy to past discrimination is present discrimination. The only remedy to present discrimination is future discrimination. As President Lyndon B. Johnson said in 1965, "You do not take a person who, for years, has been hobbled by chains and liberate him, bring him up to the starting line of a race and then say, 'You are free to compete with all the others,' and still justly believe that you have been completely fair." As U.S. Supreme Court Justice Harry Blackmun wrote in 1978, "In order to get beyond racism, we must first take account of race. There is no other way. And in order to treat some persons equally, we must treat them differently."

The racist champions of racist discrimination engineered to

maintain racial inequities before the 1960s are now the racist opponents of antiracist discrimination engineered to dismantle those racial inequities. The most threatening racist movement is not the alt right's unlikely drive for a White ethnostate but the regular American's drive for a "race-neutral" one. The construct of race neutrality actually feeds White nationalist victimhood by positing the notion that any policy protecting or advancing non-White Americans toward equity is "reverse discrimination."

That is how racist power can call affirmative action policies that succeed in reducing racial inequities "race conscious" and standardized tests that produce racial inequities "race neutral." That is how they can blame the behavior of entire racial groups for the inequities between different racial groups and still say their ideas are "not racist." But there is no such thing as a not-racist idea, only racist ideas and antiracist ideas.

So what is a racist idea? A racist idea is any idea that suggests one racial group is inferior or superior to another racial group in any way. Racist ideas argue that the inferiorities and superiorities of racial groups explain racial inequities in society. As Thomas Jefferson suspected a decade after declaring White American independence: "The blacks, whether originally a distinct race, or made distinct by time and circumstances, are inferior to the whites in the endowments both of body and mind."

An antiracist idea is any idea that suggests the racial groups are equals in all their apparent differences—that there is nothing right or wrong with any racial group. Antiracist ideas argue that racist policies are the cause of racial inequities.

Understanding the differences between racist policies and antiracist policies, between racist ideas and antiracist ideas, allows us to return to our fundamental definitions. Racism is a powerful collection of racist policies that lead to racial inequity and are substantiated by racist ideas. Antiracism is a powerful collection of antiracist policies that lead to racial equity and are substantiated by antiracist ideas.

ONCE WE HAVE a solid definition of racism and antiracism, we can start to make sense of the racialized world around us, before us. My maternal grandparents, Mary Ann and Alvin, moved their family to New York City in the 1950s on the final leg of the Great Migration, happy to get their children away from violent Georgia segregationists and the work of picking cotton under the increasingly hot Georgia sun.

To think, they were also moving their family away from the effects of climate change. Do-nothing climate policy is racist policy, since the predominantly non-White global south is being victimized by climate change more than the Whiter global north, even as the Whiter global north is contributing more to its acceleration. Land is sinking and temperatures are rising from Florida to Bangladesh. Droughts and food scarcity are ravishing bodies in Eastern and Southern Africa, a region already containing 25 percent of the world's malnourished population. Human-made environmental catastrophes disproportionately harming bodies of color are not unusual; for instance, nearly four thousand U.S. areas—mostly poor and non-White—have higher lead poisoning rates than Flint, Michigan.

I am one generation removed from picking cotton for pocket change under the warming climate in Guyton, outside Savannah. That's where we buried my grandmother in 1993. Memories of her comforting calmness, her dark green thumb, and her large trash bags of Christmas gifts lived on as we drove back to New York from her funeral. The next day, my father ventured up to Flushing, Queens, to see his single mother, also named Mary Ann. She had the clearest dark-brown skin, a smile that hugged you, and a wit that smacked you.

When my father opened the door of her apartment, he smelled the fumes coming from the stove she'd left on, and some other fumes. His mother nowhere in sight, he rushed down the hallway and into her back bedroom. That's where he found his mother, as if sleeping, but dead. Her struggle with Alzheimer's, a disease more prevalent among African Americans, was over.

There may be no more consequential White privilege than

life itself. White lives matter to the tune of 3.5 additional years over Black lives in the United States, which is just the most glaring of a host of health disparities, starting from infancy, where Black infants die at twice the rate of White infants. But at least my grandmothers and I met, we shared, we loved. I never met my paternal grandfather. I never met my maternal grandfather, Alvin, killed by cancer three years before my birth. In the United States, African Americans are 25 percent more likely to die of cancer than Whites. My father survived prostate cancer, which kills twice as many Black men as it does White men. Breast cancer disproportionately kills Black women.

Three million African Americans and four million Latinx secured health insurance through the Affordable Care Act, dropping uninsured rates for both groups to around 11 percent before President Barack Obama left office. But a staggering 28.5 million Americans remained uninsured, a number primed for growth after Congress repealed the individual mandate in 2017. And it is becoming harder for people of color to vote out of office the politicians crafting these policies designed to shorten their lives. Racist voting policy has evolved from disenfranchising by Jim Crow voting laws to disenfranchising by mass incarceration and voter-ID laws. Sometimes these efforts are so blatant that they are struck down: North Carolina enacted one of these targeted voter-ID laws, but in July 2016 the Court of Appeals for the Fourth Circuit struck it down, ruling that its various provisions “target African Americans with almost surgical precision.” But others have remained and been successful. Wisconsin’s strict voter-ID law suppressed approximately two hundred thousand votes—again primarily targeting voters of color—in the 2016 election. Donald Trump won that critical swing state by 22,748 votes.

We are surrounded by racial inequity, as visible as the law, as hidden as our private thoughts. The question for each of us is: What side of history will we stand on? A racist is someone who is supporting a racist policy by their actions or inaction or expressing a racist idea. An antiracist is someone who is supporting an antiracist policy by their actions or expressing an antiracist

idea. “Racist” and “antiracist” are like peelable name tags that are placed and replaced based on what someone is doing or not doing, supporting or expressing in each moment. These are not permanent tattoos. No one becomes a racist or antiracist. We can only strive to be one or the other. We can unknowingly strive to be a racist. We can knowingly strive to be an antiracist. Like fighting an addiction, being an antiracist requires persistent self-awareness, constant self-criticism, and regular self-examination.

Racist ideas have defined our society since its beginning and can feel so natural and obvious as to be banal, but antiracist ideas remain difficult to comprehend, in part because they go against the flow of this country’s history. As Audre Lorde said in 1980, “We have all been programmed to respond to the human differences between us with fear and loathing and to handle that difference in one of three ways: ignore it, and if that is not possible, copy it if we think it is dominant, or destroy it if we think it is subordinate. But we have no patterns for relating across our human differences as equals.” To be an antiracist is a radical choice in the face of this history, requiring a radical reorientation of our consciousness.

DUELING CONSCIOUSNESS

ASSIMILATIONIST: One who is expressing the racist idea that a racial group is culturally or behaviorally inferior and is supporting cultural or behavioral enrichment programs to develop that racial group.

SEGREGATIONIST: One who is expressing the racist idea that a permanently inferior racial group can never be developed and is supporting policy that segregates away that racial group.

ANTIRACIST: One who is expressing the idea that racial groups are equals and none needs developing, and is supporting policy that reduces racial inequity.

MY PARENTS HAD not seen each other since the bus ride to Urbana '70. Christmas approached in 1973. Soul Liberation held a concert at the iconic Broadway Presbyterian Church in Harlem that turned into a reunion of sorts for the New York attendees of Urbana '70. Dad and Ma showed up. Old friends beckoned, and something new. After the chords of Soul Liberation fell silent, my parents finally spoke again and a spark finally lit.

Days later, Dad called. He asked Ma out. "I've been called to the mission field," Ma responded. "Leaving in March."

Ma and Dad persevered, even after Ma left to teach in a rural Liberian village outside Monrovia for nine months. Eight years later they were married, daring to name me, their second son, "exalted father" when I arrived in a world not in the practice of exalting Black bodies. Just before that arrival, as my pregnant mother celebrated her thirty-first birthday on June 24, 1982, President Reagan declared war on her unborn baby. "We must

put drug abuse on the run through stronger law enforcement," Reagan said in the Rose Garden.

It wasn't drug abuse that was put on the run, of course, but people like me, born into this regime of "stronger law enforcement." The stiffer sentencing policies for drug crimes—not a net increase in crime—caused the American prison population to quadruple between 1980 and 2000. While violent criminals typically account for about half of the prison population at any given time, more people were incarcerated for drug crimes than violent crimes every year from 1993 to 2009. White people are more likely than Black and Latinx people to sell drugs, and the races consume drugs at similar rates. Yet African Americans are far more likely than Whites to be jailed for drug offenses. Nonviolent Black drug offenders remain in prisons for about the same length of time (58.7 months) as violent White criminals (61.7 months). In 2016, Black and Latinx people were still grossly overrepresented in the prison population at 56 percent, double their percentage of the U.S. adult population. White people were still grossly underrepresented in the prison population at 30 percent, about half their percentage of the U.S. adult population.

Reagan didn't start this so-called war, as historian Elizabeth Hinton recounts. President Lyndon B. Johnson first put us on the run when he named 1965 "the year when this country began a thorough, intelligent, and effective war on crime." My parents were in high school when Johnson's war on crime mocked his undersupported war on poverty, like a heavily armed shooter mocking the underresourced trauma surgeon. President Richard Nixon announced his war on drugs in 1971 to devastate his harshest critics—Black and antiwar activists. "We could arrest their leaders, raid their homes, break up their meetings, and vilify them night after night on the evening news," Nixon's domestic-policy chief, John Ehrlichman, told a *Harper's* reporter years later. "Did we know we were lying about the drugs? Of course we did."

Black people joined in the vilification, convinced that homicidal drug dealers, gun toters, and thieving heroin addicts were

flushing “down the drain” all “the hard won gains of the civil rights movement,” to quote an editorial in *The Washington Afro-American* in 1981. Some, if not most, Black leaders, in an effort to appear as saviors of the people against this menace, turned around and set the Black criminal alongside the White racist as the enemies of the people.

Seemingly contradictory calls to lock up and to save Black people duelled in legislatures around the country but also in the minds of Americans. Black leaders joined with Republicans from Nixon to Reagan, and with Democrats from Johnson to Bill Clinton, in calling for and largely receiving more police officers, tougher and mandatory sentencing, and more jails. But they also called for the end of police brutality, more jobs, better schools, and drug-treatment programs. These calls were less enthusiastically received.

By the time I came along in 1982, the shame about “Black on Black crime” was on the verge of overwhelming a generation’s pride about “Black is beautiful.” Many non-Black Americans looked down on Black addicts in revulsion—but too many Black folk looked down on the same addicts in shame.

Both of my parents emerged from poor families, one from Northern urban projects, one from Southern rural fields. Both framed their rise from poverty into the middle class in the 1980s as a climb up the ladder of education and hard work. As they climbed, they were inundated with racist talking points about Black people refusing to climb, the ones who were irresponsibly strung out on heroin or crack, who enjoyed stealing and being criminally dependent on the hard-earned money of climbing Americans like them.

In 1985, adored civil-rights lawyer Eleanor Holmes Norton took to *The New York Times* to claim the “remedy . . . is not as simple as providing necessities and opportunities,” as antiracists argued. She urged the “overthrow of the complicated, predatory ghetto subculture.” She called on people like my parents with “ghetto origins” to save “ghetto males” and women by impressing on them the values of “hard work, education, respect for family”

and “achieving a better life for one’s children.” Norton provided no empirical evidence to substantiate her position that certain “ghetto” Blacks were deficient in any of these values.

But my parents, along with many others in the new Black middle class, consumed these ideas. The class that challenged racist policies from the 1950s through the 1970s now began challenging other Black people in the 1980s and 1990s. Antiracism seemed like an indulgence in the face of the self-destructive behavior they were witnessing all around them. My parents followed Norton’s directive: They fed me the mantra that education and hard work would uplift me, just as it had uplifted them, and would, in the end, uplift all Black people. My parents—even from within their racial consciousness—were susceptible to the racist idea that it was laziness that kept Black people down, so they paid more attention to chastising Black people than to Reagan’s policies, which were chopping the ladder they climbed up and then punishing people for falling.

The Reagan Revolution was just that: a radical revolution for the benefit of the already powerful. It further enriched high-income Americans by cutting their taxes and government regulations, installing a Christmas-tree military budget, and arresting the power of unions. Seventy percent of middle-income Blacks said they saw “a great deal of racial discrimination” in 1979, before Reagan revolutionaries rolled back enforcement of civil-rights laws and affirmative-action regulations, before they rolled back funding to state and local governments whose contracts and jobs had become safe avenues into the single-family urban home of the Black middle class. In the same month that Reagan announced his war on drugs on Ma’s birthday in 1982, he cut the safety net of federal welfare programs and Medicaid, sending more low-income Blacks into poverty. His “stronger law enforcement” sent more Black people into the clutches of violent cops, who killed twenty-two Black people for every White person in the early 1980s. Black youth were four times more likely to be unemployed in 1985 than in 1954. But few connected the increase in unemployment to the increase in violent crime.

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Americans have long been trained to see the deficiencies of people rather than policy. It's a pretty easy mistake to make: People are in our faces. Policies are distant. We are particularly poor at seeing the policies lurking behind the struggles of people. And so my parents turned away from the problems of policy to look at the problems of people—and reverted to striving to save and civilize Black people rather than liberate them. Civilizer theology became more attractive to my parents, in the face of the rise of crack and the damage it did to Black people, as it did to so many children of civil rights and Black power. But in many ways, liberation theology remained their philosophical home, the home they raised me in.

DEEP DOWN, MY parents were still the people who were set on fire by liberation theology back in Urbana. Ma still dreamed of globetrotting the Black world as a liberating missionary, a dream her Liberian friends encouraged in 1974. Dad dreamed of writing liberating poetry, a dream Professor Addison Gayle encouraged in 1971.

I always wonder what would have been if my parents had not let their reasonable fears stop them from pursuing their dreams. Traveling Ma helping to free the Black world. Dad accompanying her and finding inspiration for his freedom poetry. Instead, Ma settled for a corporate career in healthcare technology. Dad settled for an accounting career. They entered the American middle class—a space then as now defined by its disproportionate White majority—and began to look at themselves and their people not only through their own eyes but also “through the eyes of others.” They joined other Black people trying to fit into that White space while still trying to be themselves and save their people. They were not wearing a mask as much as splitting into two minds.

This conceptual duple reflected what W.E.B. Du Bois indelibly voiced in *The Souls of Black Folk* in 1903. “It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking

at one's self through the eyes of others,” Du Bois wrote. He would neither “Africanize America” nor “bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism.” Du Bois wished “to be both a Negro and an American.” Du Bois wished to inhabit opposing constructs. To be American is to be White. To be White is to not be a Negro.

What Du Bois termed double consciousness may be more precisely termed *dueling* consciousness. “One ever feels his two-ness,” Du Bois explained, “an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.” Du Bois also explained how this war was being waged within his own dark body, wanting to be a Negro and wanting to “escape into the mass of Americans in the same way that the Irish and Scandinavians” were doing.

These dueling ideas were there in 1903, and the same duel overtook my parents—and it remains today. The duel within Black consciousness seems to usually be between antiracist and assimilationist ideas. Du Bois believed in both the antiracist concept of racial relativity, of every racial group looking at itself with its own eyes, and the assimilationist concept of racial standards, of “looking at one's self through the eyes” of another racial group—in his case, White people. In other words, he wanted to liberate Black people from racism but he also wanted to change them, to save them from their “relic of barbarism.” Du Bois argued in 1903 that racism and “the low social level of the mass of the race” were both “responsible” for the “Negro's degradation.” Assimilation would be part of the solution to this problem.

Assimilationist ideas are racist ideas. Assimilationists can position any racial group as the superior standard that another racial group should be measuring themselves against, the benchmark they should be trying to reach. Assimilationists typically position White people as the superior standard. “Do Americans ever stop to reflect that there are in this land a million men of Negro blood . . . who, judged by any standard, have reached the full measure of the best type of modern European culture? Is it fair, is

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it decent, is it Christian . . . to belittle such aspiration?" Du Bois asked in 1903.

THE DUELING CONSCIOUSNESS played out in a different way for my parents, who became all about Black self-reliance. In 1985, they were drawn to Floyd H. Flake's Allen African Methodist Episcopal Church in Southside Queens. Flake and his equally magnetic wife, Elaine, grew Allen into a megachurch and one of the area's largest private-sector employers through its liberated kingdom of commercial and social-service enterprises. From its school to its senior-citizen housing complex to its crisis center for victims of domestic abuse, there were no walls to Flake's church. It was exactly the type of ministry that would naturally fascinate those descendants of Urbana '70. My father joined Flake's ministerial staff in 1989.

My favorite church program happened every Thanksgiving. We would arrive as lines of people were hugging the church building, which smelled particularly good that day. Perfumes of gravy and cranberry sauce warmed the November air. The aromas multiplied in deliciousness as we entered the basement fellowship hall, where the ovens were. I usually found my spot in the endless assembly line of servers. I could barely see over the food. But I strained up on my toes to help feed every bit of five thousand people. I tried to be as kind to these hungry people as my mother's peach cobbler. This program of Black people feeding Black people embodied the gospel of Black self-reliance that the adults in my life were feeding me.

Black self-reliance was a double-edged sword. One side was an abhorrence of White supremacy and White paternalism, White rulers and White saviors. On the other, a love of Black rulers and Black saviors, of Black paternalism. On one side was the antiracist belief that Black people were entirely capable of ruling themselves, of relying on themselves. On the other, the assimilationist idea that Black people should focus on pulling themselves up by their baggy jeans and tight halter tops, getting

off crack, street corners, and government "handouts," as if those were the things partially holding their incomes down. This dueling consciousness nourished Black pride by insisting that there was nothing wrong with Black people, but it also cultivated shame with its implication that there was something behaviorally wrong with Black people . . . well, at least those other Black people. If the problem was in our own behavior, then Reagan revolutionaries were not keeping Black people down—we were keeping ourselves down.

WHITE PEOPLE HAVE their own dueling consciousness, between the segregationist and the assimilationist: the slave trader and the missionary, the proslavery exploiter and the antislavery civilizer, the eugenicist and the melting pot-ter, the mass incarcerator and the mass developer, the Blue Lives Matter and the All Lives Matter, the not-racist nationalist and the not-racist American.

Assimilationist ideas and segregationist ideas are the two types of racist ideas, the duel within racist thought. White assimilationist ideas challenge segregationist ideas that claim people of color are incapable of development, incapable of reaching the superior standard, incapable of becoming White and therefore fully human. Assimilationists believe that people of color can, in fact, be developed, become fully human, just like White people. Assimilationist ideas reduce people of color to the level of children needing instruction on how to act. Segregationist ideas cast people of color as "animals," to use Trump's descriptor for Latinx immigrants—unteachable after a point. The history of the racialized world is a three-way fight between assimilationists, segregationists, and antiracists. Antiracist ideas are based in the truth that racial groups are equals in all the ways they are different, assimilationist ideas are rooted in the notion that certain racial groups are culturally or behaviorally inferior, and segregationist ideas spring from a belief in genetic racial distinction and fixed hierarchy. "I am apt to suspect the negroes and in general all the other species of men (for there are four or five different kinds) to be naturally

inferior to the whites,” Enlightenment philosopher David Hume wrote in 1753. “There never was a civilized nation of any other complexion than white. . . . Such a uniform and constant difference could not happen, in so many countries and ages, if nature had not made an original distinction between these breeds of men.”

David Hume declared that all races are created unequal, but Thomas Jefferson seemed to disagree in 1776 when he declared “all men are created equal.” But Thomas Jefferson never made the antiracist declaration: All racial groups are equals. While segregationist ideas suggest a racial group is permanently inferior, assimilationist ideas suggest a racial group is temporarily inferior. “It would be hazardous to affirm that, equally cultivated for a few generations,” the Negro “would not become” equal, Jefferson once wrote, in assimilationist fashion.

The dueling White consciousness fashioned two types of racist policies, reflecting the duel of racist ideas. Since assimilationists posit cultural and behavioral hierarchy, assimilationist policies and programs are geared toward developing, civilizing, and integrating a racial group (to distinguish from programs that uplift individuals). Since segregationists posit the incapability of a racial group to be civilized and developed, segregationist policies are geared toward segregating, enslaving, incarcerating, deporting, and killing. Since antiracists posit that the racial groups are already civilized, antiracist policies are geared toward reducing racial inequities and creating equal opportunity.

White people have generally advocated for both assimilationist and segregationist policies. People of color have generally advocated for both antiracist and assimilationist policies. The “history of the American Negro is the history of this strife,” to quote Du Bois—the strife between the assimilationist and the antiracist, between mass civilizing and mass equalizing. In Du Bois’s Black body, in my parents’ Black bodies, in my young Black body, this double desire, this dueling consciousness, yielded an inner strife between Black pride and a yearning to be White. My

own assimilationist ideas stopped me from noticing the racist policies really getting high during Reagan’s drug war.

THE DUELING WHITE consciousness has, from its position of relative power, shaped the struggle within Black consciousness. Despite the cold truth that America was founded “by white men for white men,” as segregationist Jefferson Davis said on the floor of the U.S. Senate in 1860, Black people have often expressed a desire to be American and have been encouraged in this by America’s undeniable history of antiracist progress, away from chattel slavery and Jim Crow. Despite the cold instructions from the likes of Nobel laureate Gunnar Myrdal to “become assimilated into American culture,” Black people have also, as Du Bois said, desired to remain Negro, discouraged by America’s undeniable history of racist progress, from advancing police violence and voter suppression, to widening racial inequities in areas ranging from health to wealth.

History duels: the undeniable history of antiracist progress, the undeniable history of racist progress. Before and after the Civil War, before and after civil rights, before and after the first Black presidency, the White consciousness duels. The White body defines the American body. The White body segregates the Black body from the American body. The White body instructs the Black body to assimilate into the American body. The White body rejects the Black body assimilating into the American body—and history and consciousness duel anew.

The Black body in turn experiences the same duel. The Black body is instructed to become an American body. The American body is the White body. The Black body strives to assimilate into the American body. The American body rejects the Black body. The Black body separates from the American body. The Black body is instructed to assimilate into the American body—and history and consciousness duel anew.

But there is a way to get free. To be antiracist is to emancipate

oneself from the dueling consciousness. To be antiracist is to conquer the assimilationist consciousness and the segregationist consciousness. The White body no longer presents itself as the American body; the Black body no longer strives to be the American body, knowing there is no such thing as the American body, only American bodies, racialized by power.

CHAPTER 3

POWER

RACE: A power construct of collected or merged difference that lives socially.

WE PULLED INTO the parking lot, looking for signs of life. But the daily life of the school had ended hours ago. It was pushing four o'clock on that warm April day in 1990, on Long Island, New York.

The car was parked and I could see the unease in my parents' faces as they freed themselves from their seatbelts. Maybe they were just trying to wrap their heads around making this thirty-minute drive out to Long Island twice a day, every weekday, year after year—on top of their hour-long job commutes to Manhattan. I sensed their discomfort and felt my own. Nerves about changing schools. Wishing P.S. 251 went past second grade. Feeling sick being so far from home in this foreign neighborhood. My seven-year-old feelings were roiling.

Several public elementary schools resided within walking distance of my house in Queens Village. But Black New Yorkers with the wherewithal to do it were separating their children from poor Black children in poor Black neighborhoods, just like White New Yorkers were separating their children from Black children. The dueling consciousness of White parents did not mind spend-

ing more money on housing in order to send their kids to White public schools—and keep them away from the purportedly bad schools and bad children. The dueling consciousness of Black parents did not mind paying for private Black schools to keep their children away from those same public schools and children.

A Black woman greeted us at the front door of Grace Lutheran School. She had been waiting. She was the school's third-grade teacher, and after a quick greeting, she took us down a corridor. Classrooms stood on both sides, but I fixated on the class photos outside the rooms: all those adult White faces and young Black faces looking back at us. We occasionally peeked inside nicely decorated classrooms. No sounds. No students. No teachers. Just footsteps.

She took us to her third-grade classroom, a long throw from the entrance. We could see the materials laid out for a science project, the details of which she explained to us. I couldn't care less about raising chicks. Then she took us over to a round table and asked if we had any questions. Sitting down, my mother asked a question about the curriculum. I did not care much about that, either. I started looking more intently around the classroom. A pause in the discussion caught my attention—Dad had just asked about the racial makeup of the student body. Majority Black. I took note. My mind drifted away again, this time wandering around the classroom and around the school, trying to imagine the students and teachers, remembering those pictures in the hallway. A pause caught my attention again. A question popped out of me.

“Are you the only Black teacher?”

“Yes, but—”

I cut her off. “Why are you the only Black teacher?”

Puzzled, she looked away at my parents. My parents exchanged curious looks. I kept staring at the teacher, wondering why she was looking at my parents. Ma ended the awkward silence. “He has been reading biographies of Black leaders.”

Ma was talking about the critically acclaimed Junior Black Americans of Achievement series, promoted by Coretta Scott

King. Dad had bought a stack of these biographies, towering over one hundred now. Martin Luther King Jr. Frederick Douglass. Mary McLeod Bethune. Richard Allen. Ida B. Wells. Dad kept urging me to pull from the tower for every writing project.

These gripping biographies were as exciting to me as new video games on my Sega Genesis. Once I started reading, I could not stop. Discovering through these books the long history of harm done to Black Americans left me seething and brought to life a kind of racial consciousness for the first time.

“He is very much aware of being Black,” Ma made sure to add, looking at Dad. She did not look for confirmation. Dad nodded in agreement anyway, as I stared at the teacher, awaiting my answer.

In that classroom, on that April day in 1990, my parents discovered that I had entered racial puberty. At seven years old, I began to feel the encroaching fog of racism overtaking my dark body. It felt big, bigger than me, bigger than my parents or anything in my world, and threatening. What a powerful construction race is—powerful enough to consume us. And it comes for us early.

But for all of that life-shaping power, race is a mirage, which doesn't lessen its force. We are what we see ourselves as, whether what we see exists or not. We are what people see us as, whether what they see exists or not. What people see in themselves and others has meaning and manifests itself in ideas and actions and policies, even if what they are seeing is an illusion. Race is a mirage but one that we do well to see, while never forgetting it is a mirage, never forgetting that it's the powerful light of racist power that makes the mirage.

So I do not pity my seven-year-old self for identifying racially as Black. I still identify as Black. Not because I believe Blackness, or race, is a meaningful scientific category but because our societies, our policies, our ideas, our histories, and our cultures have rendered race and made it matter. I am among those who have been degraded by racist ideas, suffered under racist policies, and who have nevertheless endured and built movements and cultures

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to resist or at least persist through this madness. I see myself culturally and historically and politically in Blackness, in being an African American, an African, a member of the forced and unforced African diaspora. I see myself historically and politically as a person of color, as a member of the global south, as a close ally of Latinx, East Asian, Middle Eastern, and Native peoples and all the world's degraded peoples, from the Roma and Jews of Europe to the aboriginals of Australia to the White people battered for their religion, class, gender, transgender identity, ethnicity, sexuality, body size, age, and disability. The gift of seeing myself as Black instead of being color-blind is that it allows me to clearly see myself historically and politically as being an antiracist, as a member of the interracial body striving to accept and equate and empower racial difference of all kinds.

Some White people do not identify as White for the same reason they identify as not-racist: to avoid reckoning with the ways that Whiteness—even as a construction and mirage—has informed their notions of America and identity and offered them privilege, the primary one being the privilege of being inherently normal, standard, and legal. It is a racial crime to be yourself if you are not White in America. It is a racial crime to look like yourself or empower yourself if you are not White. I guess I became a criminal at seven years old.

It is one of the ironies of antiracism that we must identify racially in order to identify the racial privileges and dangers of being in our bodies. Latinx and Asian and African and European and Indigenous and Middle Eastern: These six races—at least in the American context—are fundamentally power identities, because race is fundamentally a power construct of blended difference that lives socially. Race creates new forms of power: the power to categorize and judge, elevate and downgrade, include and exclude. Race makers use that power to process distinct individuals, ethnicities, and nationalities into monolithic races.

THE FIRST GLOBAL power to construct race happened to be the first racist power and the first exclusive slave trader of the constructed race of African people. The individual who orchestrated this trading of an invented people was nicknamed the “Navigator,” though he did not leave Portugal in the fifteenth century. The only thing he navigated was Europe’s political-economic seas, in order to create the first transatlantic slave-trading policies. Hailed for something he was not (and ignored for what he was)—it is fitting that Prince Henry the Navigator, the brother and then uncle of Portuguese kings, is the first character in the history of racist power.

Prince Henry lived in me. The name Henry had traveled down through the centuries and over the Atlantic Ocean and eventually into my father’s family. After my mother gave my older brother a middle name from her family, Dad chose a middle name for me from his family. He chose the name of his enslaved great-great-grandfather, Henry. Dad did not know that this ancestor shared the name of the Navigator, but when I learned the history, I knew it had to go. My middle name is now Xolani, meaning peace, the very thing Henry’s slave traders snatched from Africa (and the Americas and Europe), the thing they snatched from my ancestor Henry.

Until his death in 1460, Prince Henry sponsored Atlantic voyages to West Africa by the Portuguese, to circumvent Islamic slave traders, and in doing so created a different sort of slavery than had existed before. Premodern Islamic slave traders, like their Christian counterparts in premodern Italy, were not pursuing racist policies—they were enslaving what we now consider to be Africans, Arabs, and Europeans alike. At the dawn of the modern world, the Portuguese began to exclusively trade African bodies. Prince Henry’s sailors made history when they navigated past the feared “black” hole of Cape Bojador, off Western Sahara, and brought enslaved Africans back to Portugal.

Prince Henry’s first biographer—and apologist—became the first race maker and crafter of racist ideas. King Afonso V com-

missioned Gomes de Zurara, a royal chronicler and a loyal commander in Prince Henry's Military Order of Christ, to compose a glowing biography of the African adventures of his "beloved uncle." Zurara finished *The Chronicle of the Discovery and Conquest of Guinea* in 1453, the first European book on Africa.

One of Zurara's stories chronicled Prince Henry's first major slave auction in Lagos, Portugal, in 1444. Some captives were "white enough, fair to look upon, and well proportioned," while others were "like mulattoes" or "as black as Ethiops, and so ugly." Despite their different skin colors and languages and ethnic groups, Zurara blended them into one single group of people, worthy of enslavement.

Unlike babies, phenomena are typically born long before humans give them names. Zurara did not call Black people a race. French poet Jacques de Brézé first used the term "race" in a 1481 hunting poem. In 1606, the same diplomat who brought the addictive tobacco plant to France formally defined race for the first time in a major European dictionary. "Race . . . means descent," Jean Nicot wrote in the *Trésor de la langue française*. "Therefore, it is said that a man, a horse, a dog, or another animal is from a good or bad race." From the beginning, to make races was to make racial hierarchy.

Gomes de Zurara grouped all those peoples from Africa into a single race for that very reason: to create hierarchy, the first racist idea. Race making is an essential ingredient in the making of racist ideas, the crust that holds the pie. Once a race has been created, it must be filled in—and Zurara filled it with negative qualities that would justify Prince Henry's evangelical mission to the world. This Black race of people was lost, living "like beasts, without any custom of reasonable beings," Zurara wrote. "They had no understanding of good, but only knew how to live in a bestial sloth."

After Spanish and Portuguese colonizers arrived in the Americas in the fifteenth century, they took to race making all the different indigenous peoples, calling them one people, "Indians," or *negros da terra* (Blacks from the land) in sixteenth-century Brazil.

Spanish lawyer Alonso de Zuazo in 1510 contrasted the beastly race of Blacks as "strong for work, the opposite of the natives, so weak who can work only in undemanding tasks." Both racist constructions normalized and rationalized the increased importing of the supposedly "strong" enslaved Africans and the ongoing genocide of the supposedly "weak" Indians in the Americas.

The other races, save Latinx and Middle Easterners, had been completely made and distinguished by the Age of Enlightenment in the eighteenth century. Beginning in 1735, Carl Linnaeus locked in the racial hierarchy of humankind in *Systema Naturae*. He color-coded the races as White, Yellow, Red, and Black. He attached each race to one of the four regions of the world and described their characteristics. The Linnaeus taxonomy became the blueprint that nearly every enlightened race maker followed and that race makers still follow today. And, of course, these were not simply neutral categories, because races were never meant to be neutral categories. Racist power created them for a purpose.

Linnaeus positioned *Homo sapiens europaeus* at the top of the racial hierarchy, making up the most superior character traits. "Vigorous, muscular. Flowing blond hair. Blue eyes. Very smart, inventive. Covered by tight clothing. Ruled by law." He made up the middling racial character of *Homo sapiens asiaticus*: "Melancholy, stern. Black hair; dark eyes. Strict, haughty, greedy. Covered by loose garments. Ruled by opinion." He granted the racial character of *Homo sapiens americanus* a mixed set of attributes: "Ill-tempered, impassive. Thick straight black hair; wide nostrils; harsh face; beardless. Stubborn, contented, free. Paints himself with red lines. Ruled by custom." At the bottom of the racial hierarchy, Linnaeus positioned *Homo sapiens afer*: "Sluggish, lazy. Black kinky hair. Silky skin. Flat nose. Thick lips. Females with genital flap and elongated breasts. Crafty, slow, careless. Covered by grease. Ruled by caprice."

FROM 1434 TO 1447, Gomes de Zurara estimated, 927 enslaved Africans landed in Portugal, "the greater part of whom were

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turned into the true path of salvation.” It was, according to Zurara, Prince Henry’s paramount achievement, an achievement blessed by successive popes. No mention of Prince Henry’s royal fifth (*quinto*), the 185 or so of those captives he was given, a fortune in bodies.

The obedient Gomes de Zurara created racial difference to convince the world that Prince Henry (and thus Portugal) did not slave-trade for money, only to save souls. The liberators had come to Africa. Zurara personally sent a copy of *The Chronicle of the Discovery and Conquest of Guinea* to King Afonso V with an introductory letter in 1453. He hoped the book would “keep” Prince Henry’s name “before” the “eyes” of the world, “to the great praise of his memory.” Gomes de Zurara secured Prince Henry’s memory as surely as Prince Henry secured the wealth of the royal court. King Afonso was accumulating more capital from selling enslaved Africans to foreigners “than from all the taxes levied on the entire kingdom,” observed a traveler in 1466. Race had served its purpose.

Prince Henry’s racist policy of slave trading came first—a cunning invention for the practical purpose of bypassing Muslim traders. After nearly two decades of slave trading, King Afonso asked Gomes de Zurara to defend the lucrative commerce in human lives, which he did through the construction of a Black race, an invented group upon which he hung racist ideas. This cause and effect—a racist power creates racist policies out of raw self-interest; the racist policies necessitate racist ideas to justify them—lingers over the life of racism.

FROM THE JUNIOR Black Americans of Achievement series onward, I had been taught that racist ideas cause racist policies. That ignorance and hate cause racist ideas. That the root problem of racism is ignorance and hate.

But that gets the chain of events exactly wrong. The root problem—from Prince Henry to President Trump—has always been the self-interest of racist power. Powerful economic, politi-

cal, and cultural self-interest—the primitive accumulation of capital in the case of royal Portugal and subsequent slave traders—has been behind racist policies. Powerful and brilliant intellectuals in the tradition of Gomes de Zurara then produced racist ideas to justify the racist policies of their era, to redirect the blame for their era’s racial inequities away from those policies and onto people.

THE TEACHER SOON overcame her surprise at a seven-year-old questioning her about the paucity of Black teachers. After searching my parents’ faces, she looked back at me. “Why are you asking that question?” she asked nicely.

“If you have so many Black kids, you should have more Black teachers,” I said.

“The school hasn’t hired more Black teachers.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know.”

“Why don’t you know?”

My parents could see my agitation growing. Dad changed the subject. I didn’t mind. My train of thought had taken me away, anyway. I was thinking about what Ma had just said. I am Black. I am Black.

I ended up attending a private Lutheran school closer to home, White third-grade teacher and all. I did not mind until I noticed.

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