

(BOOK REVIEW)

STILL STAMPED: KENDI'S  
HISTORY OF RACIST IDEAS

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Ibram X. Kendi. *Stamped from the Beginning: A Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America.* New York, NY: Nation Books, 2016. 582 pp. ISBN: 9781568584638 (Hardback, \$30); 9781568585987 (Paper, \$12); 9781568584645 (Ebook, \$13).

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**A**t a time when questions of heritage and history are at odds with narratives of rights and antiracism, Ibram X. Kendi offers a relevant and timely history of racism in the U.S. In *Stamped from the Beginning*, Kendi (2016) details cogently how racist ideas have arrived at their current modes of expression in American culture. In terms of history books, *Stamped from the Beginning* offers readers a “definitive history of racist ideas” with its thoughtful genealogy of unjust policies and racial tensions that plague the current U.S. social and political climate.

On every page, Kendi documents evidence of how racist ideas have evolved into the policy of today’s society. All the while, he provides the groundwork to explore more deeply the long-fought struggle for antiracism amid two often competing racist attitudes—assimilation and segregation—attitudes that have worked to institutionalize racist policies and that attempt to justify internalized racist ideas. However, as the author states, “*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” (p. 8). Instead, *Stamped* tells of the long developing struggle to give voice to antiracism against the backdrop of long-established racist policy in this country.

As such, Kendi not only aims to compile a record of the past but challenges how both Black and White citizens view racism in our present state of unrest. For example, Kendi writes, “No matter what African people did, they were barbaric beasts or brutalized like beasts. If they did not clamor for freedom, then their obedience showed they were naturally beasts of burden. If they nonviolently resisted enslavement, they were brutalized” (p. 70). For Black America today, the same “no-win” situation continues. Whether Black athletes respectfully kneel in a stadium for an anthem or African American citizens assemble in the streets to protest injustice, the racist tendency is to label them as unpatriotic or as thugs.

Structurally, *Stamped* is divided into five parts, each titled for a significant racist or antiracist historical figure. These *personae* become not only headings under which Kendi crafts his chronicle but also serve as symbols for the views of racism and antiracism that lead up to and take shape around the era that their lives represent. Respectively, these characters are Cotton Mather, Thomas Jefferson, William Lloyd Garrison, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Angela Davis.

“Part I Cotton Mather” begins with the spread of hierarchical human theories dating back to the conquest of Northern Africa. Through the propagation of racist ideas by a family of ministers, The Mathers, prejudice against people due to their skin color spans an ocean and reaches a critical point in the early founding of the American colonies. Concurrently, Kendi lays bare the roots of racist ideas in the age-old discourses of climate theory and curse theory. Climate theorists found justification for their claim of “Black inferiority” in the Hellenistic belief that “extreme hot or cold climates produced intellectually, physically, and morally inferior people . . .” (p. 17). Likewise, scripture gave support to the curse theorists, alleging that Africans “were the children of Ham, the son of Noah, and that they were . . . black as the result of Noah’s curse [on Ham] . . .” (p. 21). By the time slavery comes to the American colonies, countless ministers and scholars had appropriated scripture and pseudo-science to justify their views on slavery. In Cotton Mather, these theories manifested in the notion that God had ordained Africans to be captives in order that the superior White man could bring them salvation (Kendi, 2016).

In “Part II Thomas Jefferson,” Kendi continues to trace his historical trail into the period of the Enlightenment. However, the Enlightenment, characteristically marked by *antislavery* movements, did not inspire any great change concerning *racism*. Enlightened secularists, like Carl Linnaeus and Voltaire, although disdaining the institution of slavery, further legitimated the views of segregationists

and assimilationists, and upheld the racist perspective that people of African descent were base and backward. Kendi aptly points out that Voltaire did not differ much from the Mathers in this regard. It was the midst of this timeline that a young 16-year-old Thomas Jefferson “immersed himself in Enlightenment thought, including its antislavery ideas” (p. 90). Through Jefferson, Kendi offers the reader a perspective of the emergent shift in the negative discourses about “natural” place and the paradox that many Whites faced by being slaveholders who held antislavery philosophies. As well, Kendi introduces Phyllis Wheatley, Francis Williams, and Benjamin Banneker as individuals of African descent that challenged the prejudices of the dominating White Eurocentric narrative and initiated the call for equality and emancipation. However, abolitionist and antislavery thought, Kendi demonstrates, did little to reverse the racist ideas that underscored the “discriminatory policies [that] were a feature of almost every emancipation law” (p. 120).

In transitioning to the controversial theory of gradual equality, Kendi brings focus on William Lloyd Garrison as a central character. Throughout this section, *Stamped* surveys the work of firebrand abolitionists, such as Benjamin Lundy and David Walker. Also, slave revolts, like that led by Nat Turner, are integrated into the storyline. In the stalwart control of slavery, many captives were not satisfied to “wait while White abolitionists and refined free Blacks solved the problem through nonviolent tactics of persuasion” (p. 172). As a result, White men engaged in ensuant debates, questioning whether the slave could be *civilized* or was the Black man cursed to be ever *imbruted*. Meanwhile, abolitionists had their own debates. Frederick Douglass, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and a young statesman named Abraham Lincoln become key figures in abolitionism. However, as the eponymous exemplar of *the racist abolitionist*, Garrison provides cohesion to Kendi’s recognition of this contradictory but consistent theme. As Kendi notes, “For thirty years,

Garrison had moved northerners toward abolitionism by sensationalizing the idea that slavery made people into brutes. Like any racist, he dismissed the evidence that undermined this theory, and hardened his theory with evidence that supported it" (. 229).

Part IV opens with W. E. B. Du Bois' words: "The slave went free; stood a brief moment in the sun; then moved back again toward slavery." Du Bois represents the era of Reconstruction. His theme is segregation. "W. E. B. Du Bois" encompasses the *Plessy vs. Ferguson* ruling, Theodore Roosevelt, Social Darwinism, the Ku Klux Klan, the Great Wars, eugenics, *Gone with the Wind*, and the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Around these people, places, and Pulitzer-prize winners, Du Bois' is a tale of the segregation, social struggle, and suffering of Black America during Jim Crow. Unsubstantiated accusations against Black men as rapists and unsupported "research" on the inferiority of people of African descent describe the persistence and inhumanity of racism. Nonetheless, "W. E. B. Du Bois" serves to explore the aspects of what Kendi calls the first authentically antiracist ideas. The emergence of antiracism ranges from the NAACP and Alaine Locke's *media suasion* to the literature of Zora Neale Hurston and the genre of the *protest novel*.

Kendi concludes his exploration of racist policies and ideas with a final section that he titles "Angela Davis." A primary theme of Kendi's historical narrative in this section is class racism and ghetto culture. As Kendi writes, "Class racists and some suburban Americans saw little distinction between impoverished Black urban neighborhoods, Black working-class urban neighborhoods, and Black middle-class urban neighborhoods. They were all [seen as] ghettos with dangerous Black hooligans who rioted for more welfare" (p. 395). However, Kendi's call for Black equality becomes its loudest and clearest through Davis. Although various historical actors of the modern era—Marcus Garvey, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King, Jr.—stand in as voices of civil rights and unrest, it is Angela Davis who

takes centerstage. Kendi recounts how she transformed from an advocate to an activist for the rights of Black people. Moreover, Davis' image is a fitting end to this important retelling of racist ideas in the U.S. Although Kendi concludes with his thoughts on Reagan's war on drugs, two chapters on the relationship between partisanship and racism, and a discourse on Barack Obama, Angela Davis remains the encompassing *persona*. Davis's experience, herself a victim of racist policies, speaks to the ongoing fight for equality and continued protests against racist policies.

In a Deweyan sense, *Stamped from the Beginning* is a democratic text. It is a book that provides a space for long-forgotten interests and often unheard voices. Kendi, like Dewey, problematizes racism as a concern "of [our] conjoint communicated experience" (Dewey, 1916, p. 87). As Dewey stated, our associated mode of living is a democratic work "equivalent to the breaking down of those barriers of class, race, and national territory" (p. 87) that divide us. As a historical account of how policy reifies racist ideas, *Stamped from the Beginning* focuses our thoughts on how our actions relate to others. By taking the reader to relevant sites through history, Kendi reveals how the barriers formed by racist ideas have "kept men from perceiving the full import of their activity" (Dewey, 1916, p. 87). Therefore, not only does Kendi pen a comprehensive timeline of slavery, segregation, and struggle, he also challenges us to confront racism and to consider why such racial barriers still persist today.

***References***

Dewey, J. (1916). *Democracy and education: An introduction to the philosophy of education*. Free Press.