Chapter Two

America: How Did We Get Here?

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This second chapter of the Healing History Web Page is an exploration of how we as a country have reached a point where—in the 21st century—we suffer from such divisiveness, and so many people experience so many physical and behavioral health challenges due to such long-standing inequities. How did those inequities start, and how did they gain such a foothold in our society?

There is finally enough well documented information available to help us all learn with confidence a lot of the “what” and the “why” of history. The links and authors cited throughout the Healing History Web Page will point to an abundance of reliable sources. (Some of the richest resources collected for Chapter Two will be highlighted in the boxed-in areas of this essay.)

But we’re talking about centuries’ worth of people doing unthinkable things—things like buying and selling other human beings, denying their humanity, hating people sight unseen, selling their children, torturing and killing them, cheating them out of any hope of success or power, and tolerating the wholesale betrayal, abuse, and murder of millions of people.

It seems almost wrong to launch into the what and the why of this story without at least raising the question, how in the world could all this ever have happened? So we’ll dip into that question on our way through this essay, knowing that our answers are bound to be incomplete.

Photo courtesy National Memorial for Peace and Justice, Birmingham, Alabama.
This essay will include nine sections:

- The birth of slavery
- Slavery in America
- The neurobiology of fear
- Importing trauma
- The invention of “race”
- The invention of “whiteness”
- Telling lies
- Believing lies
- What about us?

**The Birth of Slavery**

The human fear of scarcity and want—of not having enough to survive—has made money and power potent drugs. Long before industrialization and the information age paved the way to the sky-high profits we see today, many powerful people learned that they could increase their wealth by paying less for labor—and magnify their wealth many times over by forcing human beings to work for free.

Slavery had existed in many forms since ancient times. Often people were captured and enslaved by conquering nations, or indentured servants were obliged to work off their debts. Then the “discovery” of North and South America and the islands in the Caribbean and the Gulf of Mexico opened up a huge market for enslaved labor, and supply quickly followed demand.

The trans-Atlantic slave trade of the 16th through 19th centuries ran on a massive scale, involved many countries (primarily Portugal, England, Spain, France, Holland, and Denmark), concentrated heavily on plundering Central and West Africa, and used kidnapped human beings as merchandise to be bought, sold, and traded.

**Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents**

Isabel Wilkerson

This beautiful book is a rich mixture of historical, conceptual, and deeply human thought, focusing on the American racial caste system and bringing in information from caste systems in India and in Nazi Germany. For Bryan Stevenson’s video interview with Isabel Wilkerson, click here.

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(For more on the history of slave ships, click here.)

**Amazing Grace: From Slave Trader to Abolitionist**

After a seemingly miraculous rescue from a violent storm at sea, former slave trader John Newton, age 22, vowed to devote the rest of his life to his faith. He went on to become an Anglican priest and co-founded the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade—and to write the song, “Amazing Grace” (Christiano and Neimand, 2021). For a wonderful video of Stanford Talisman (a group that focuses on songs of Black liberation) singing “Amazing Grace” at Morehouse College, click here.
As Isabel Wikerson wrote in *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents*, “The institution of slavery was, for a quarter millennium, the conversion of human beings into currency, into machines who existed solely for the profit of their owners, to be worked as long as the owners desired, who had no rights over their bodies or loved ones, who could be mortgaged, bred, won in a bet, given as wedding presents, bequeathed to heirs, sold away from spouses or children to cover an owner’s debt or to spite a rival or to settle an estate (Wilkerson, 2020, pp. 44-45). *(To read the National Geographic article, “How Slavery Flourished in the United States,” click here.)*

America was not the first market for this new “currency,” but it rapidly became a thriving market. In 1619, the first captives to reach this continent were some 20-30 enslaved Angolans aboard the *White Lion*, to be traded to Virginia colonists for provisions. *(To read Isabel Wilkerson’s description of the arrival of slavery in the Colonies, click here. And to read Ibram X. Kendi’s description of “A Community of Souls,” click here.)*

“Those men and women who came ashore on that August day were the beginning of American slavery,” wrote Nikole Hannah-Jones in *The 1619 Project*. “They were among the 12.5 million Africans who would be kidnapped from their homes and brought in chains across the Atlantic Ocean in the largest forced migration in human history until the Second World War. Almost two million did not survive the grueling journey, known as the Middle Passage” (Hannah-Jones and New York Times Company, 2021).

**Afrofuturism in Story, Song, and Poetry about the Middle Passage**

The history of the Middle Passage inspired Abdul Qadim Haqq and Dai Sato to create a graphic novel called *The Book of Drexciya*. This fantasy tells the story of a mythical civilization of children born in and living forever at the bottom of the sea, under the Middle Passage. Here are links to:

- an article from *The Guardian* about *The Book of Drexciya*,
- a song inspired by this work: “The Deep,” by Daveed Diggs and Clipping,
- “The Sea is History,” a poem by Derek Walcott.

Chapter 1 of the Healing History Web Page, “Africa: Ripe for the Plunder,” took a closer look at the trans-Atlantic trade routes, the many directions their human cargo traveled, and the many cultures that arose from this massive forced migration. *(For more on the history of slave ships, click here.)*

**Slavery in America**

“In the early days of colonial America, the vast majority of people compelled to work for landowners were vagrant children, convicts, and indentured laborers imported from Europe,” wrote Dorothy
“These laborers, known as bondsmen or indentured servants, were employed for a specified number of years by wealthy landowners,” wrote Resmaa Menakem. “After each laborer had fulfilled his or her contract of servitude, he or she would be given freedom, as well as a chunk of money or, sometimes, a small parcel of land” (Menakem, 2017, p. 69).

But over the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, “…as the slave trade mushroomed,” wrote Roberts, “Africans began to be subjected to a distinct kind of servitude: they alone were considered the actual property of their enslavers” (Roberts, in Hannah-Jones and New York Times Company, 2021, p. 49). This highly profitable practice, called “chattel slavery,” used the law to deny people freedom and ordinary human and civil rights. Chattel slavery gradually became the norm for enslaved Black people in the United States and many of the island countries. (For a video of Rhiannon Giddens’s haunting version of “Wayfaring Stranger,” click here.)

“In 1860, the U.S. Census counted nearly four million enslaved people living in the 12 slave states (Alabama, Arkansas, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, Missouri, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia) (Strochlic, 2019).

“By the time the Civil War began, in 1861, Southern states had established an elaborate governing framework for race relations,” wrote Hannah-Jones. “Through trial and error, as well as careful planning, white authorities had created oppressive laws and systems of patrolling, surveillance, and punishment, all of which were designed to protect enslavers and the white citizenry from the consequences of their own unmitigated violence and to ensure centuries of prosperity for the planter elite.

“If the Confederacy had been a separate nation when the Civil War began, it would have ranked among the richest in the world. As the historian Steven Deyle writes in Carry Me Back: The Domestic
Clearly enslaved labor was a huge resource in a number of industries. However, history tells us much about the conditions in which enslaved people lived and worked, and we know that the enforcers of these conditions must have had human feelings and values. If we return to our troubling question—how could this have happened—what can we find to explain it? How could so many people do the brutal work they were told they must do to control so many people?

We’ll explore that question in the remaining sections, starting with a quick look at the human brain and the “contagion” of trauma from Europe to America.

**The Neurobiology of Fear**

Especially in the behavioral health field, it’s tempting to blame many things on the human brain, that brilliant but delicately balanced organ whose most powerful urge—among many competing urges—is to keep us alive and functioning.

- While the sophisticated “higher brain” is capable of unselfish moral and spiritual decisions, the task of individual survival is left in the power of the ancient and primitive “emotional brain.” Fueled by powerful chemicals and automatic reactions, the emotional brain mobilizes the body to cope with high stress and escape immediate physical danger (van der Kolk, 2014).

- The primitive emotional brain is in many ways more powerful than the higher and more sophisticated “thinking” brain. It makes quick decisions based on very little information, and it acts on these decisions long before the higher brain can clarify the situation (Scaer, 2005).

- This internal alarm system (including the amygdala) is also prone to overreaction. Its responses to long-term stress and trauma—the experience of overwhelming distress—can leave lasting physical and psychological challenges that can harm our health and resilience (Rothschild, 2000). These challenges can even affect our genetic codes and be passed down to the next generation through a process called “epigenetics” (Lehrner and Yehuda, 2018).

- A history of trauma can also make us prone to extreme stress responses, clouding our judgment and giving us powerful “fight or flight” urges—even in situations where we really
need clear thinking, compassion, wisdom, and moral courage (van der Kolk, 2014). If we lash out in anger or fear, we can pass our stress injuries on to others. This is one reason some experts speak of the “contagion” of trauma (Blanch and Shern, 2011).

We might well wonder what could have been going on in the minds of people who bought and sold human beings, who imposed cruel rules and inhumane conditions, and who enforced those rules by any means they thought necessary.

But if we do, we might also wonder what was going on in their brains. How often were they reacting to stress—too full of adrenaline to get any input from their higher, “thinking” brains, and instead taking the primitive advice of their emotional brains? And what kinds of experiences had set the tone for their stress responses?

In other words, who were those people who inflicted so much trauma on the Black and Brown lives under their power? Who were they, and what had been their own experience of trauma?

**Importing Trauma**

“Throughout the United States’s history as a nation, white bodies have colonized, oppressed, brutalized, and murdered Black and Native ones, but well before the United States began, powerful white bodies colonized, oppressed, brutalized, and murdered other, less powerful white ones” wrote author and trauma specialist Resmaa Menakem in his healing and highly practical book, *My Grandmother’s Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies*.

“The carnage perpetrated on Blacks and Native Americans in the New World began, on the same soil, as an adaptation of longstanding white-on-white practices” (Menakem, 2017, p. 62).

According to Menakem, “The 1500s and 1600s in England were anything but gentle times. People were routinely burned at the stake for heresy, a practice that began in the twelfth century and continued through 1612.”
“Torture was an official instrument of the English government until 1640. The famous Tower of London was, in part, a huge torture chamber...During much of the Middle Ages in England, torture wasn't just wildly popular; it was a spectator sport.

“It is not hard to understand why so many people from England fled to the American colonies,” he wrote. “Many of the English who colonized America had been brutalized, or had witnessed great brutality first-hand. Others were the children and grandchildren of people who had experienced such savagery in England.

“Isn’t it likely that many of them were traumatized by the time they arrived here?” asked Menakem. “Did over ten centuries of medieval brutality, which was inflicted on white bodies by other white bodies, begin to look like culture?” (Menakem, 2017, p. 59-61).

Driven by the demons of their own historical trauma, how many of the slave traders and slave holders—and the financially strapped whites they hired as enforcers—found in their enslaved victims, not only a chance for profit or survival, but also a safe outlet for their pain and their rage?

Of course, this raises another question: Where was the wiser, more sophisticated higher brain through all this? Why didn’t the higher brain step in like the adult in the family, imposing order and reason?

The Invention of “Race”

As it turns out, the higher brain was there all along. There were Black and white abolitionists who fought the slave trade and sought to end slavery—though, of course, not enough of them, and nowhere near powerful enough. But there were also many nimble minds who were busy building rationalizations to “justify” slavery, inhumane treatment, and all the laws and codes necessary to protect these practices (Kendi, 2016).

“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,” wrote Ibram X. Kendi in his epic *Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America*. “The reason is...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” (Kendi, 2016, p. 11-12).

In *How to Be an Antiracist*, Kendi defined “racism” as a marriage of policies and ideas that produce and normalize racial inequity (racial inequity being a state in which “two or more racial groups are not standing on approximately equal footing”) (Kendi, 2019, pp. 17-18). And perhaps the central racist idea was the invention of the concept of “race.”

You’ve probably heard this before, but if you haven’t, it may surprise you: *There is actually no such thing as “race.”* Apart from possible differences in skin pigmentation, hair texture, and dimensions of certain facial features, there is no fundamental genetic difference between what we in the United States have been raised to think of as different races. DNA—the genetic codes that tell our bodies how to develop and function—can give us an idea of what regions our ancestors came from, but they can’t pinpoint any particular racial group (Wilkerson, 2020; Kendi, 2016).

In other words, race is only an idea invented by human beings, and millions of people have suffered and died at the hands of that idea.

According to Kendi, “The word race first appeared in Frenchman Jacques de Brézé’s 1481 poem ‘The Hunt,’ where it referred to hunting dogs. As the term expanded to include humans over the next century, it was used primarily to identify and differentiate and animalize African people. Thanks to this malleable concept in Western Europe, the British were free to lump the multiethnic Native Americans and the multiethnic Africans into the same racial groups” (Kendi, 2016, p. 36). *For more from Prof. Kendi on racist ideas, click here.*

In Kendi’s exhaustive history of the development and use of racist ideas, he learned much by studying the sources that the early American race theorists consulted, sources dating back to Aristotle (384 to 322 BCE) (Kendi, 2016). Kendi identified several theories that were used to justify the colonies’ particularly brutal and absolute form of slavery, including:

- Aristotle’s “climate theory” (people who come from countries that are too cold or too hot are inferior and meant to be slaves),
- the “curse of Ham theory” (Noah cursed his son Ham for walking in on him when he was naked, so people from Africa—presumably descended from Ham’s son—are doomed to slavery forever), and
- polygenesis theories (theories identifying the first ancestors of Indigenous Americans and Africans as something other than the traditional Judeo-Christian Adam and Eve—for example, an ape or a “second Adam”) (Kendi, 2016).
In her graceful and encyclopedic book, *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents*, Isabel Wilkerson discussed American racism as one example of a “caste system.” “A caste system is an artificial construction, a fixed and embedded ranking of human value that sets the presumed supremacy of one group against the presumed inferiority of other groups on the basis of ancestry and often immutable traits,” wrote Wilkerson. “A caste system uses rigid, often arbitrary boundaries to keep the ranked groupings apart, distinct from one another and in their assigned places” (Wilkerson, 2020, p. 17).

According to Wilkerson, “The tyranny of caste is that we are judged on the very things we cannot change: a chemical in the epidermis, the shape of one’s facial features, the signposts on our bodies of gender and ancestry—superficial differences that have nothing to do with who we are inside” (Wilkerson, 2020, p. 379). (For more thoughts from Isabel Wilkerson on “Labeling the Human Container,” click here.)

**The Invention of “Whiteness”**

And, of course, the invention of race—with a Black race of “negroes” at the bottom of the ladder—gave rise to the invention of the “white race” on the top rung. Just who qualified as “white” changed over time, as successive waves of immigrant labor flooded into the new nation. For a while the Irish and the Italians (for example) were designated “Black,” but they lacked the skin pigmentation that would have identified them as black. It was a lot harder to detect their fundamental “inferiority” when they lost their accents, so eventually they became officially white (Wilkerson, 2020).

Becoming white entitled people to something that in contemporary times is called “white privilege”—essentially the privilege of not being part of the group that has been named and treated as a permanent underclass. The “privileges” that came with being white included things like:

- the privilege of making decisions about their own lives, their bodies, their work, their resources, their living situations, and their families;
- the privilege of being educated, being paid fairly for their labor, and being allowed to buy property if they could afford it;
- the privilege of being recognized as and treated like a human being with fundamental human and civil rights;
In the slave states, the presence of free labor had kept the wages of white workers at rock bottom, and wages stayed low after the newly freed sharecroppers were forced to work for little or nothing (McGhee, 2022). So there were large numbers of impoverished white people who would never have considered themselves “privileged.”

Still, many clung fiercely to their whiteness, particularly as the landed gentry pointed the finger of blame toward the Black people whose slave labor had lowered wages overall. Over and over, whites were told that Black people were their enemies and the real cause of their misery (Wilkerson, 2020).

“It must be remembered that the white group of laborers, while they received a low wage, were compensated in part by a sort of public and psychological wage,” wrote W.E.B. DuBois in his essay on Black Reconstruction. “They were given public deference and titles of courtesy because they were white. They were admitted freely with all classes of white people to public functions, public parks, and the best schools. The police were drawn from their ranks, and the courts, dependent on their votes, treated them with such leniency as to encourage lawlessness. Their vote selected public officials, and while this had small effect upon the economic situation, it had great effect upon their personal treatment and the deference shown them. White schoolhouses were the best in the community, and conspicuously placed, and they cost anywhere from twice to ten times as much per capita as the colored schools. The newspapers specialized on news that flattered the poor whites and almost utterly ignored the Negro except in crime and ridicule” (DuBois, 1935, pp. 700-701).

Telling Lies

Nourished by the powerful caste system and the artificial concept of race, lies and slurs about people of African descent had grown like weeds in the New World. Kendi cited a few early examples of common insults, including “black deformed elf,” “filthy sodomits, sleepers, ignorant, beast, disciples of Cham…to whom the blaccke darknesse is reserved for ever.” “These were the ideas about African people circulating throughout England and the English colonies as African people were being hauled into Britannia on slave ships” (Kendi, 2016 p. 37).
The most powerful myths were often those designed to justify:

- slavery (Black people are savages and they need white dominance to civilize them),
- brutal treatment (Black people don’t feel much pain, and they’re lazy and won’t work unless you beat them), or
- sexual control (Black people are over-sexed, with women who have insatiable appetites and men who are obsessed with raping white women) (Kendi, 2016).

Particularly interesting were the many common myths about Black people’s behavior that seemed to be projections of behaviors that were common among white enslavers and enforcers. For example, many of the people who accused Black people of being brutish were themselves engaged in brutish violence toward Black people. And rape, though uncommon behavior for Black men, was very common among white slave-holders, who could then increase their workforce with the children they conceived when they raped the women they enslaved (Wilkerson, 2020; Kendi, 2016; Roberts, in Hannah-Jones and New York Times Company, 2021).

Racist ideas might have started out as unfounded theories and convenient lies, but lies repeated over and over can have a hypnotic effect. Over time, the slaveholders and their official and unofficial white enforcers accepted these lies without question, cemented them into the culture, and reinforced them through endless repetition. These lies became their excuses for all the things they did that violated the deeper values and principles of the human community (Kendi, 2016). And the lies were probably reinforced by the fears that drove the lies in the first place, including:

- fear of failing to make enough profit or enough money to stave off poverty;
- fear of losing the higher status they could cling to as long as there was a permanent Black underclass;
- fear of the powerful and violent men their stereotypes had convinced them that Black men were; and perhaps
- fear of finding out that they had been wrong—and that they had been violating their own moral codes all along.

And so the lies spread throughout the culture—North and South—and down the generations. And perhaps the only thing more destructive than making many white people believe these lies was making many Black people believe them.
Believing Lies

In his breathtaking 1963 book, The Fire Next Time, James Baldwin described how racism invades Black children’s belief structures. “This world is white and they are black. White people hold the power, which means that they are superior to blacks (intrinsically, that is: God decreed it so), and the world has innumerable ways of making this difference known and felt and feared. Long before the Negro child perceives this difference, and even longer before he understands it, he has begun to react to it, he has begun to be controlled by it. Every effort made by the child’s elders to prepare him for a fate from which they cannot protect him causes him secretly, in terror, to begin to await, without knowing that he is doing so, his mysterious and inexorable punishment” (Baldwin, 1963, p. 26).

Baldwin’s work is haunted by the lies that were invented to justify slavery and other inequities—lies that are still tightly woven into the fabric of our society. In Begin Again: James Baldwin’s America and its Urgent Lessons for Our Own, historian Eddie Glaude Jr. traced some of these lies through Baldwin’s writing “These are the narrative assumptions that support the everyday order of American life, which means we breathe them like air. We count them as truths. We absorb them into our character. We see these lies every day in the stereotypes that black people are lazy, dishonest, sexually promiscuous, prone to criminal behavior, and only seeking a handout from big government” Glaude, 2020, p. 7). (For more from Eddie Glaude Jr. on James Baldwin and “The Lie,” click here.)

For many people of color, survival and sanity have required that they learn to have their own experience in the moment, but at the same time stay mindful of how that experience is being perceived by the white people around them (Oluo, 2018). This phenomenon did not end with reconstruction or the passage of civil rights legislation in the 1960s. To the extent that white people have had power over their safety and well-being, this has been an important enduring survival skill, but it has robbed many people of peace, privacy, autonomy, and spontaneity.

Poet-historian W.E.B. DuBois, writing at the end of the 19th century, called this phenomenon “double consciousness.” “It is a peculiar sensation,” he wrote, “this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One feels his two-ness—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, 1897).

With these fundamental lies so deeply embedded in our culture, many African Americans have had to negotiate and adjust to difficult social and psychological challenges all their lives. Much can get lost along the way. “You were not expected to aspire to excellence,” Baldwin wrote to his nephew in The Fire Next Time, “you were expected to make peace with mediocrity” (Baldwin, 1963, p. 7).

And, as Ibram X. Kendi wrote in How to Be an Antiracist, “Internalized racism is the real Black on Black crime” (Kendi, 2019, p. 8).

What About Us?

One reason it may be important to ask the question, How in the world could this history have happened? is that another question often lurks beneath it: What does all this say about me—and about us?

This might be followed by questions like:

- Who would I have been if I’d lived 400 years ago? What would have happened to me? What might I have done?
- If people who look like me have been subjected to atrocities, what does that say about me? Does it make me a victim? How can I carry history with honor and dignity?
- If people who look like me have committed atrocities, what does that say about me? Does it make me a bad person? How can I carry history with honor and dignity?
- If my ancestors were subjected to trauma and humiliation, how much of their pain am I carrying in my body? Will it ever heal?

We do carry the past, but how much of the past do we carry? Does it determine our future? Our success? (To read the words of Keisha N. Blain on “Our Ancestors’ Wildest Dreams,” click here.)

Though there are many ways trauma is passed down from generation to generation—in our traditions, our customs, our beliefs, and our genes—resilience and healing are also passed down in all those ways. Our brains and our bodies are good at repairing and regenerating themselves, and epigenetic changes in DNA expression can also reflect the progress we’ve made toward health and well-being (Lehrner and Yehuda, 2018).

A few more questions:

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**Souls of Black Folk**

W.E.B. DuBois

Published in 1903, this beautiful classic is a series of essays on subjects that, taken together, tell the heartbreaking story of reconstruction and its brutal aftermath. [For an interview with biographer David Levering Lewis on how DuBois changed American thinking, click here.](https://example.com)

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A few more questions:
If people who look like us have been oppressed—and/or we have been oppressed:

- What do we do with our grief and our anger? Do we have the courage to experience these emotions and work through them, preferably in community with people who will listen, understand, and act as respectful witnesses?
- How do we work on changing the circumstances that have allowed oppressive acts to happen?
- Do we forgive people (or a people) whose oppression—or whose ignorance about our lives—has done a lot of damage?

Forgiveness is complicated and not a simple matter of choice, because the barriers to forgiveness are often wound around the roots of our trauma. Sometimes our attempts to remove those barriers can help the healing process, and sometimes they can make things much worse. Forgiveness can also be dangerous, if it tells us to trust people who haven’t earned our trust. We must go carefully.

And, as author and activist bell hooks told Maya Angelou in 1998, “For me, forgiveness and compassion are always linked: How do we hold people accountable for wrongdoing and yet at the same time remain in touch with their humanity enough to believe in their capacity to be transformed?” (McLeod, 1998). (To read the full interview, click here.)

And if people who look like us have oppressed others—and we ourselves have made some harmful mistakes in our own lives:

- How do we stop being afraid of these insights, open ourselves up to learning more, and keep looking for ways we can do better?
- How do we transform our guilt and shame into a sense of responsibility and commitment—something that would be much more useful than guilt and shame, and much more pleasant for us and everyone else?
- And, again, how do we work on changing the circumstances that have allowed oppressive acts to happen?

In his dazzling study, How to Be an Antiracist, Ibram X. Kendi starts out with two 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” (Kendi, 2019, p. 13).
Notice the word “is” in each of those definitions. Kendi is not saying an antiracist is someone who has done everything right all along—who has always been a successful antiracist. No: I am a racist or an antiracist in this moment, based on what I am doing in this moment. I don’t have to beat myself up for getting it wrong in the past—or for the fact that others have gotten it spectacularly wrong throughout history. I just have to learn how to promote equity through my words and actions now, and keep doing my best to do that.

How to Be an Antiracist
Ibram X. Kendi
This book presents Kendi’s concepts of antiracism within the context of his own story, through several phases of his development. He also wrote a young children’s version called Antiracist Baby. For a video interview with Prof. Kendi on How to Be an Antiracist, click here.

(For a powerful video of the traditional spiritual, “Hold On,” sung by the Kuumba Singers with Bobby McFerrin in Leipzig, Germany, click here.)

As we travel through the new and growing body of chapters, essays, links, and resources on this Web Page, we will try to keep the same courageous spirit that Kendi demonstrated—ready to listen, ready to question our assumptions, and ready to learn more. If our listening, our questions, and our learning do nothing else, they will at least remind us that:

- we are alive in this world,
- we are responsible for our part of it,
- we are not powerless, and
- we are not alone.

Welcome to this journey.
References


