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HOW TO

BE AN

ANTIRACIST

IBRAM X.

KENDI



ONE WORLD
NEW YORK

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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 rain-storm 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 "anti-racist." 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.

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.