



STAMPED FROM THE BEGINNING

*The
Definitive
History of
Racist Ideas
in America*

"[An] engrossing and relentless
intellectual history of prejudice in America."

—WASHINGTON POST

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In order to fully explain the complex history of racist ideas, *Stamped from the Beginning* must chronicle this racial progress and the simultaneous progression of racist policies. Hate and ignorance have not driven the history of racist ideas in America. Racist policies have driven the history of racist ideas in America. And this fact becomes apparent when we examine the causes behind, not the consumption of racist ideas, but the production of racist ideas. What caused US senator John C. Calhoun of South Carolina in 1837 to produce the racist idea of slavery as a "positive good," when he knew slavery's torturous horrors? What caused Atlanta newspaper editor Henry W. Grady in 1885 to produce the racist idea of "separate but equal," when he knew southern communities were hardly separate or equal? What caused think tankers after the presidential election of Barack Obama in 2008 to produce the racist idea of a postracial society, when they knew all those studies had documented discrimination? Time and again, racist ideas have not been cooked up from the boiling pot of ignorance and hate. Time and again, powerful and brilliant men and women have produced racist ideas in order to justify the racist policies of their era, in order to redirect the blame for their era's racial disparities away from those policies and onto Black people.

I was taught the popular folktale of racism: that ignorant and hateful people had produced racist ideas, and that these racist people had instituted racist policies. But when I learned the motives behind the production of many of America's most influentially racist ideas, it became quite obvious that this folktale, though sensible, was not based on a firm footing of historical evidence. Ignorance/hate → racist ideas → discrimination: this causal relationship is largely ahistorical. It has actually been the inverse relationship—racial discrimination led to racist ideas which led to ignorance and hate. Racial discrimination → racist ideas → ignorance/hate: this is the causal relationship driving America's history of race relations.

Their own racist ideas usually did *not* dictate the decisions of the most powerful Americans when they instituted, defended, and tolerated discriminatory policies that affected millions of Black lives over the course of American history. Racially discriminatory policies have usually sprung from economic, political, and cultural self-interests,

self-interests that are constantly changing. Politicians seeking higher office have primarily created and defended discriminatory policies out of political self-interest—not racist ideas. Capitalists seeking to increase profit margins have primarily created and defended discriminatory policies out of economic self-interest—not racist ideas. Cultural professionals, including theologians, artists, scholars, and journalists, were seeking to advance their careers or cultures and have primarily created and defended discriminatory policies out of professional self-interest—not racist ideas.

When we look back on our history, we often wonder why so many Americans did not resist slave trading, enslaving, segregating, or now, mass incarcerating. The reason is, again, racist ideas. The principal function of racist ideas in American history has been the suppression of resistance to racial discrimination and its resulting racial disparities. The beneficiaries of slavery, segregation, and mass incarceration have produced racist ideas of Black people being best suited for or deserving of the confines of slavery, segregation, or the jail cell. Consumers of these racist ideas have been led to believe there is something wrong with Black people, and not the policies that have enslaved, oppressed, and confined so many Black people.

Racist ideas have done their job on us. We have a hard time recognizing that racial discrimination is the sole cause of racial disparities in this country and in the world at large. I write *we* for a reason. When I began this book, with a heavy heart for Trayvon Martin and Rekia Boyd, I must confess that I held quite a few racist ideas. Even though I am an Africana studies historian and have been tutored all my life in egalitarian spaces, I held racist notions of Black inferiority before researching and writing this book. Racist ideas are ideas. Anyone can produce them or consume them, as *Stamped from the Beginning's* interracial cast of producers and consumers show. Anyone—Whites, Latina/os, Blacks, Asians, Native Americans—anyone can express the idea that Black people are inferior, that something is wrong with Black people. Anyone can believe both racist and antiracist ideas, that certain things are wrong with Black people and other things are equal. Fooled by racist ideas, I did not fully realize that the only thing wrong with Black

people is that we think something is wrong with Black people. I did not fully realize that the only thing extraordinary about White people is that they think something is extraordinary about White people.

I am not saying all individuals who happen to identify as Black (or White or Latina/o or Asian or Native American) are equal in all ways. I am saying that there is nothing wrong with Black people *as a group*, or with any other racial group. That is what it truly means to think as an antiracist: to think there is nothing wrong with Black people, to think that racial groups are equal. There are lazy and unwise and harmful individuals of African ancestry. There are lazy and unwise and harmful individuals of European ancestry. There are industrious and wise and harmless individuals of European ancestry. There are industrious and wise and harmless individuals of African ancestry. But no racial group has ever had a monopoly on any type of human trait or gene—not now, not ever. Under our different-looking hair and skin, doctors cannot tell the difference between our bodies, our brains, or the blood that runs in our veins. All cultures, in all their behavioral differences, are on the same level. Black Americans' history of oppression has made Black opportunities—not Black people—inferior.

When you truly believe that the racial groups are equal, then you also believe that racial disparities must be the result of racial discrimination. Committed to this antiracist idea of group equality, I was able to self-critique, discover, and shed the racist ideas I had consumed over my lifetime while I uncovered and exposed the racist ideas that others have produced over the lifetime of America. I know that readers truly committed to racial equality will join me on this journey of interrogating and shedding our racist ideas. But if there is anything I have learned during my research, it's that the principal producers and defenders of racist ideas will not join us. And no logic or fact or history book can change them, because logic and facts and scholarship have little to do with why they are expressing racist ideas in the first place. *Stamped from the Beginning* is about these closed-minded, cunning, captivating producers of racist ideas. But it is not for them.

My open mind was liberated in writing this story. I am hoping that other open minds can be liberated in reading this story.