

**Sermon:** Stamped from the Beginning, Feb 6<sup>th</sup> 2022  
Rev. Steve Wilson & Kathryn Lee Pacific Unitarian Universalist Church

Ibram X Kendi is a man on fire. As I stated in the intro, “Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America” was awarded the 2016 National non-fiction book of the year. It made him a star. He has since written how to be an Anti-Racist and Anti-racist baby.

Here is his picture.



To write something you refer to as “the definitive history of” is an act of bravery that requires one to be either or both diligent or delusional. He is only the former. Kendi is a soft-spoken scholar full of hard truths.

Although his demeanor is soft and scholarly, his tone placid and metered, pick up this book and you will have a head full of the ideas that have taken our country, and us as a people on the disturbing journey of racism we have had. From the arrival of the first slaves in the early 1600’s to the present moment for Kendi, it is ideas and the policies that spring from them that matter.

Kendi wrote “Stamped” prior to the moment George Floyd’s murder changed the world, but during the time Trevon Martin was killed. A time when Obama was in office, when Black Lives Matter started, and the renewal of overt racism that helped put Trump in office. Kendi speaks about being torn between sitting at his desk and finishing his book, and heading out to the streets in protest. Thankfully, for us, at least, he finished the book.

Although Kendi, has dug painstakingly through America’s history and pre-history of racial ideas; Although he has produced a 585 page monster of a book, remarkably he has not seemed to have fallen in love with ornate ideas or words.

I say that because in contrast to its length and breadth, Kendi has created simple categories and definitions for what racism is, and how it has functioned throughout American history.

Few do or even could argue that whites and blacks live unequally.

Kendi defines his job as explaining how Americans have thought about race across time as being most defined by how they have answered this one perennial question. Why is that?

Just why, do we see such a consistent different status and experience between white and black people?

All our ideas about race all have circulated around the question of why?

Why is it that black men are twenty one times more likely to be in jail than their white peers?

Why is it that today the average white family has on average one thirteenth times the wealth the average black family has?

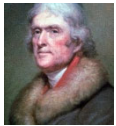
For Kendi, this simple and yet polarizing question really does define the racial debate and every idea or position ever taken in it.

In “Stamped” Kendi chooses to narrate how differently that question has been answered across our 400 year history as a Nation via the nearly consecutive lives of 5 pre-eminent people. 5 famous icons of each age whose ideas best define their era’s outlook on that question. Kathryn will walk us through these characters in more detail, but in quick sketches here they are in the order they appear.

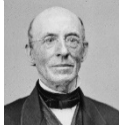
For most of the first hundred years before independence in the 1600’s the prolific scholar, preacher, and obviously 17<sup>th</sup> century wig fashionista Cotton Mather, is our guide.



For most of the second half of the 1700’s during the colonial period and into the early 1800’s Kendi hangs the American conversation on race on the liberator and slaveholder Thomas Jefferson.



In the mid 1800’s, during the peak of slavery, thru the civil war, and into and beyond the blessing and failure of reconstruction, how we talked and thought about race and the races are pinned largely to the fiery lapels of abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison.



In the transition from the post reconstruction period of the 1800’s on up to thru the 20<sup>th</sup> century and into the early part of the civil rights movement of 1960’s for Kendi it is the scholar W. E. B. Dubois who is the best posterchild to defines the conversation.



And Kendi explains the evolution from the period of the fight for civil rights and on into the flowering of the Anti-Racist movement of our times on the consistently bold life of Angela Davis.



Each of these historical figures are the muse, the hook, the vehicle, and the shoulders upon which the ideas of their period are presented and compared. He chooses these important thinkers because in his effort to keep our 400 year old national journey of racism focused on the IDEAS

that shaped it, he chooses to focus in on the people who produced and shaped those ideas rather than the consumers of a racial idea.

Spoiler alert. Some of our best thinkers- in particular the early ones- have thought very offensive things

In that same spirit, rather than spend ink getting into the business of whether Thomas Jefferson or Cotton Mather were more racist than others, Kendi smartly but somewhat unsatisfyingly defers the question to offer a more complex examination of their ideas. He asks not whether they as people were, but rather whether each one of their ideas contributed to more or less equality between blacks and whites. Almost every iconic guide is a mixed bag of progress and racism.

Let's hear from Kathryn about how our famous thinkers are the touchstone for the differing ideas about race in each Era.

*(Kathryn takes over)*

## BIO'S AND HISTORICAL PERIOD

(Kellie please re-project these)

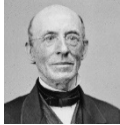


**(1660's to 1720):** The first period in American, or technically pre-American history represented by a historical figure is **Cotton Mather**. Mather represents our history of ideas about race from a couple generations after the puritans arrived up to the first two decades of the 1700's. Mather who lived from the 1660's to the 1720's was not an, but the intellectual giant in his time, publishing as much as all his contemporaries combined. Cotton Mather was the first American to be accepted as a member of England's Royal Society. The racial questions in the air during Mather's time was not surprisingly framed in theological terms. The words are difficult to even say, but essentially, "Were black people human enough to become Christian, and be civilized. Feel free to translate "human enough" to "white enough." Asked another equally offensive way, were their souls, as Mather postulated separate enough from their animalistic bodies to "save" in the Christian sense. I know, gross.



**(1743 to 1826):** Kendi's icon for the second period examined is **Thomas Jefferson**. Thomas Jefferson is chosen as the icon of the revolutionary moment because he was both important in changing the nature and questions regarding race from primarily theological ones to secular ones. Jefferson was in all his complexity also the ideological bridge between segregationist and assimilationists ideas. As a figure who took America through the revolutionary war on thru to the early stages of the Abolitionist movement Jefferson both spoke of the evils of slavery, and yet refused to free his own slaves. Jefferson voiced at points a belief in polygenesis. Polygenesis, was, or maybe sadly is the belief that the races had different evolutionary origins. It is for this reason that Jefferson believed it was the privilege of the Anglo-Saxon to enslave and oppress the African. Yuck. Among his many thoughts regarding race, Jefferson, as did Abraham

Lincoln at one juncture, advocated re-colonization of freed blacks back to Africa. Jefferson in one moment rails at the evils of slavery and in the next puts pen to paper that blacks don't belong in American society.



**(1826-1879) William Lloyd Garrison** being the most important advocate for the abolition of slavery is Kendi's representative for the mid 1800's. Garrison's historical moment and his voice was the poignant period of time that led up to the civil war, saw the end of slavery, and carried us thru reconstruction Garrison was clearly a step forward from Jefferson. As the Editor of "The Liberator" he fervently called for America to see the inherent dignity of black people, and spoke boldly about how the sin of slavery had and were turning people into brutes. Garrison is to Kendi unquestionably the best representative of the assimilationist ideas of the 1800's. Although Garrison was fervent about ending slavery he did call for a cautious and managed approach to its dissolution. He advocated that a slow path towards equality be connected and paced to the cultural development of the black community. A managed program that essentially taught them how to be civilized. It is completely fair to translate Garrison's ideas about what was more civilized into more white. The ornate phrase for this cultural development was called "uplift suasion."

Although the equally famous and important Fredrick Douglas was not the icon Kendi chose to pin this era of racist ideas too. Douglas, the leading black intellectual of this moment, was another pivotally important person from this period who also promoted the idea that slavery and oppression was making dysfunctional people.



**(1868-1963) W.E.B. Du Bois (Boiys)** The representative that spans the long stretch of time from the end of reconstruction to the civil rights movement was the famous New England born sociologist and writer W.E.B. Du Bois. Du Bois is an interesting character in part because his views evolved from assimilationist to anti-racist. Dubois is said to have what has been referred to as having a double consciousness. Dubois paved the way for the very simple idea that "the only thing wrong with black people is that we think there is something wrong with black people. Dubois scholarly approach was a powerful image of black intellectualism and dignity.



**(1963-Today) Angela Davis** Rounding out Kendi's iconic representatives, and really Kendi's poster child for modern anti-racist thought is Angela Davis. Davis was an academic from UCLA, who was from her origins a fully committed anti-racist and political radical. She

associated for many years with the American Communist Party, and was twice put in prison by then California governor, Ronald Reagan. Davis has been a reviled, revered, vilified and venerated character for her outspoken empowered takes on the dignity of African American's, her brave life, and steadfast commitment to for the last 60 years.

(back to Steve)

In general his list of muses, most often offer some positive progress from the past, but yet, in their view still carry the limitations of the next generation.

I think it was a wise choice to narrate the journey with these well-known characters. We love biographies, and by **deeply locating the likes of Jefferson and Angela Davis in their own times we get** a very personal way to both learn about the complexity of each era of American history.

I personally found it helpful to imagine these characters guiding me through a Disney-esque ride dedicated to the hard history of America's racism. I came to imagine each of these historical legends standing by in the way a mechanical character one might encounter on a Disney ride does, narrating that era of America's racist history. I don't say this to in any way be disrespectful of an overtly sober topic. I suspect unconsciously I caricatured these icons as a way of alleviating the pain of this disturbing journey of mostly offensive ideas about black people.

However, when you pause to think about American's sugarcoated approach to history, oddly enough a Disney ride based on Kendi's book is actually not a bad idea.

**Although there is a generally progressing sense of how we think about the why of racial inequality, Kendi wants to remind us that there is also a permanent and repeating way we answer the question of why such racial disparity persists.**

Across this 400 year span, Kendi groups all the possible responses to this perennial question of Why do we see such racial differences into three basic types. He says there have been and are in America "Segregationist ideas, beliefs, and policies," "Assimilationist ideas, beliefs, and policies," and as we move to the modern moment "anti-racist ideas and policies."

Kathryn is going to step in here to provide us with a fuller description of how Kendi defines these

Segregationist ideas, Assimilationist ideas, and Anti-Racist ones.

HERE IS MY DESCRIPTION OF THAT SECTION, NOT SAYING IT IS YOURS.

**Segregationist ideas, Assimilationist ideas, and Anti-Racist ones.**

For Kendi, the definition of a racist idea is an idea that suggests that there is something superior or inferior about one race over another, and likewise a racist policy being any law, but really any cultural choice that increases inequality is racist. Quite simple right?

**Segregationist:** For Segregationists, as Kendi describes it, the answer to the big question of why racial inequality exists is painfully and simply that black people in some innate, biological, often divinely intended, but always permanent way are different. This is primarily a Nature argument. That is not technically the traditional definition of what a segregationist is. Segregation more technically involves separation as the primary solution to how to manage the racial differences between blacks and whites. However the belief that our racial differences are ontological and irreconcilable, and choosing to keep the races separate obviously connected.

**Assimilationist:** The assimilationist position generally rejects the idea that races are biologically, ontologically, genetically, or divinely superior or inferior to each other as the answer to why there is racial inequality. However, it replaces biological differences with the idea that the source of the difference is cultural. It is this difference in culture and in the accumulative historical experiences of the different races that for assimilationists account for the difference. This position can feel like a soft and gentle way to understand the differences. Historically, the idea of a cultural difference between the races is a common and comfortable view for white liberals, and many of the ideas of the assimilationists carry over into an anti-racist position. Assimilationist ideas, generally have rested on the premise that deprived environments and traumatic experiences like being enslaved make people brutes. In this view, poverty isn't just about a lack of resources, but can be an experience that actually dehumanizes people.

However, Kendi wants to remind us that from a more fully anti-racist lens, assimilationists still hold to the belief that blacks are culturally inferior, and in being inferior truly need to better themselves in order to truly be equals. If there were to be a summary of the assimilationist take on what policies should be taken, it would be that terms that blacks needed to be civilized before they be given rights, or in the context of the incredibly important Homestead act, quite literally their own 40 acres and a mule. Embedded in the Assimilationist position is the confusingly named concept of "uplift suasion." Uplift suasion proposes that it's up to blacks to conform to white norms to be accepted. This clearly places the onus of responsibility on those who have traditionally been seen as "less than" to improve themselves, rather than simply being accepted for who they are or for society, or for society to make amends and reparations.

**Anti-Racist view:** The Anti-racist answer to the question of why we see such inequality is simpler. It is that blacks and whites have had, and still have different opportunities to succeed. Moreover, blacks have been measured by standards and judgements based exclusively on the whiteness that rules. For anti-racists, who firmly believe that "the races" are equal, albeit in some ways different, what other answer could there be? Can you feel the empowering change in tone? Anti-racists take the step assimilationists never do and that is to propose that black people AND their culture are worthy of their own validity and of respect without needing to meet a white standard as the default standard prescription of what is valuable. Hot and cool all at once.

*(Back to Steve)*

If the categorization of Segregationist, Assimilationist, and Anti-Racist seem simple. There is even a simpler rubric for how Kendi chooses to define all policies and ideas. He believes there are racist and anti-racist ideas, and the criteria for this ultimately simple analysis is an equally simple question, Does, or is this or that policy, this or that idea, lead to greater inequality between the races, or does it lessen it?

Yes, it is that simple.

Let's take a pause in the review of Kendi's drive towards a conclusion to hear from **Kathryn**, some expressions about how the ideas about the race, and their fundamental nature are played out in the some of the classic books and movies of the last 100 years.

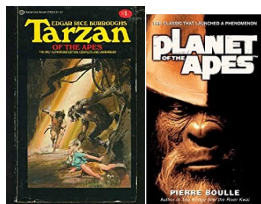
\*Kellie will project a still photo from each of these on Powerpoint briefly while you discuss them.

Kathryn explains this:



### **Birth of a Nation:**

I think Birth of a Nation deserves a full paragraph of its impact in shaping the American ideas: Seen above are two posters for one of the landmark early epics of American silent cinema, “The Birth of a Nation.” In the second, you can see below what became the Title, the original proposed titled, “The Clansman.” In that poster we see a white heroine on horseback, played by Lilian Gish, escorted by a Ku Klux Klansman. “The Birth of a Nation” was first exhibited on January 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1915 in Riverside, CA. It sold out on the second night and thus was subsequently moved to screenings in downtown LA’s movie theatres.



### **Tarzan and Planet of the Apes:**

Here's Kendi's take on how *Planet of the Apes* replaced *Tarzan* in racist popular culture, inspiring many film sequels, a tv show, comic books, video games, and other merchandise. While *Tarzan* put on America's screens the racist confidence of conquering the dark world that prevailed in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, *Planet of the Apes* held up in full color the racist panic during the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century of the conquered dark world rising up to enslave the White conqueror.” - Kendi, p.401

(Back to Steve)

A change in policy For Kendi, the best path forward is paved with changes in policy and the norms that come with it shapes our ideas. It must be said that Kendi for all his simplicity he does use the term “**policy**” very broadly and loosely. For example, affirmative action is for Kendi a policy, but so is slavery. How we as a society choose to fund education, and even how we accept or don't accept people into even private colleges fits into the category of a policy too. Really for Kendi any rule or norms by which society functions is a policy.

Kendi describes America's answers to the question of race as not necessarily moving forward, as much as that both anti-racist AND racist ideas each grow increasingly sophisticated over time. And that interestingly enough is a new idea to me.

Repeatedly Kendi also reminds us that nobody claims they are a racist. Nobody, defines their position as grounded in their self-interest, or as rooted in hate. Everyone believes their position, their idea to be grounded in reality. As to how things are. As truth. This blind spot of humanity, is not unique to questions of race or racism. We humans, are deeply, deeply inclined to silently, unconsciously find facts to support our feelings, and interests. This is what makes racism, and so much else, something of a deft magic trick we play on both ourselves and others to support our self-interest.

I would wish to add that nearly everything we believe to be true is. One of my favorite parts of this book is how it displays how invisible the ideas we have can be to us. Or, said another way, that we do not know we have minds full of ideas. One example of this is the unconscious bias we have to the very notion of what segregated and integrated neighborhoods and or schools are. Kendi points out that there is an unchallenged assumption that segregated spaces are black space and integrated spaces are white space, and that there is an unquestioned idea that segregated spaces are made better when they are desegregated. Interesting.

One of the many examples he highlights for how policy, or the rules that govern society can lead ideas is the example of interracial marriage. Interracial marriage was only legalized in 1967. I hadn't either known or remembered that. That was interestingly the year I was born, and although there was a lot of issues and push back to the legalization of interracial marriage at the start, the acceptance of the right to marry someone of a different race, is now broadly, broadly accepted at least as a right. If not as a practice. Two generations ago, my grandmother did not go to her own daughter's wedding in large part because she married a catholic.

#### CONCLUSION:

In the end not surprisingly Kendi leaves us with a simple perspective to the perennial question of just why there are such persistent different experiences of what we call "the races." The not surprisingly simple answer being, the opportunities afforded them. For Kendi, any idea that there is something...anything beyond differences in opportunities or resources to answer the question of Why? Do we see such vast differences is in itself the problem. In fact, the very idea that there is something wrong or limited about black people, whether organically for sure, but even culturally has been immensely distracting. To Kendi, unseeing that black people have a problem is my words here more than half the battle.

#### **Kathryn has the last word on this.**

Kendi surmises that to the degree that we come to clearly see blacks and whites as equal, not exactly culturally the same, but of equal value, is the degree and the hope that we can then know that the answer to differences are rooted in how policy has moved itself historically.

Kendi asks, just what would our world look like if we instead put the burden on white people to fix the inequalities we've created, institutionalized, and promoted from the very beginning of this country?

What if in seeing that we have put white culture and norms at the center of our national self-image is similar to the mistake of putting the earth at the center of the solar system.

What if we worked to correct that wrong and see what might happen.

I say we participate in that experiment. **Amen**