In *Stamped from the Beginning*, Africana Studies scholar **[Ibram X. Kendi](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/stamped-from-the-beginning/characters/ibram-x-kendi)** proposes that there are three kinds of ideas when it comes to race: [**segregationist**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/stamped-from-the-beginning/terms/segregationist) ideas, which assert that there is something inherently and permanently wrong with Black people; [**assimilationist**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/stamped-from-the-beginning/terms/assimilationist) ideas, which suggest that Blackness is inferior to whiteness but that this can be improved through assimilation into whiteness; and antiracist ideas, which assert that there is nothing wrong with Black people. Kendi centers his history of racist ideas around five central figures: the colonial preacher [**Cotton Mather**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/stamped-from-the-beginning/characters/cotton-mather), the slaveholding president and author of the [**Declaration of Independence**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/stamped-from-the-beginning/symbols/declaration-of-independence) [**Thomas Jefferson**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/stamped-from-the-beginning/characters/thomas-jefferson), the white abolitionist [**William Lloyd Garrison**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/stamped-from-the-beginning/characters/william-lloyd-garrison), the scholar [**W. E. B. Du Bois**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/stamped-from-the-beginning/characters/w-e-b-du-bois), and the scholar and Black Power activist Angela Davis. These five figures are “arguably the most prominent or provocative racial theorists of their respective lifetimes.”

In the 17th century, Cotton Mather’s grandfather [**John Cotton**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/stamped-from-the-beginning/characters) writes the first constitution of New England, which legalizes the purchase of enslaved people. Colonial settlers justify the enslavement of Africans using ideas about race developed via imperialism back in Europe. During the 1500s, colonial travel writers suggested that African people were inferior due to the hot conditions back in Africa, which supposedly had a corrupting impact on humanity; this is known as the “climate theory” of Black inferiority. However, a rival theory suggests that Black people are actually inferior because they are the descendants of the “evil, tyrannical, and hypersexual” biblical figure Ham; this is known as the “curse theory.”

At 11, Cotton Mather becomes the youngest student to enroll at Harvard College. During the Salem Witch Trials, he becomes fascinated with witches and how the white women accused of witchcraft often blame the “Black Devil man” for corrupting them. Mather develops an obsession with protecting the purity of white society against (African) devilishness and immortality. He argues that slavery is a divine opportunity to save African heathens’ souls. As such, he is “America’s first great assimilationist.”

The European Enlightenment—which takes place from the end of the 17th century to the beginning of the 19th—sees a proliferation of theorizing about race. Some scholars advance the theory of polygenesis, which refers to the idea that the white and Black races were created separately. In the 18th century, the abolitionist movement gains momentum among Quakers and other Christian denominations.

When Thomas Jefferson’s father, Peter dies, 14-year-old Thomas becomes the official head of his household, which includes a plantation where 66 people are enslaved. Influenced by Enlightenment ideas, Jefferson serves as the legal defendant of a self-emancipation biracial man, Samuel Howell, and argues that “under the law of nature, all men are born free.” He loses the case.

[**Phillis Wheatley**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/stamped-from-the-beginning/characters/phillis-wheatley), an enslaved African woman, becomes the first published Black poet in American history. She is cruelly “exhibited” around England in order to prove the white abolitionists’ point that Black people’s intellectual merits mean they shouldn’t be enslaved. In the Revolutionary era, Jefferson is one of many American leaders who rhetorically compare being subjected to British colonial rule to being enslaved. Drafting what will become the Declaration of Independence, Jefferson asserts that “all Men are created equal”—even though he’s an enslaver. During the Revolutionary War, Jefferson composes *Notes of the State of Virginia*, once again straddling both anti-slavery and anti-abolitionist positions. He ultimately advocates that Black people should gradually be freed, educated, and sent back to Africa.

Kendi writes that in 1787, Jefferson begins raping his daughter Polly’s enslaved maid, 14-year-old Sally Hemings. The pair have many children together, though Jefferson publicly denounces interracial reproduction. At the turn of the 19th century, enslaved Haitians stage a rebellion and establish the first free Black state in the world. Jefferson and other enslavers worry about this revolutionary movement spreading to the U.S. But rebellions do take place, just as they have ever since the first enslaved Africans were brought to American shores. Jefferson dies on the 50th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence, surrounded by the Black people enslaved in his household.

When William Lloyd Garrison begins his career as an abolitionist, many Northerners fatalistically feel that slavery is a permanent evil. Garrison initially advocates for the gradual abolition of slavery but soon calls for immediate abolition. Four years after meeting the formerly enslaved writer and orator [**Frederick Douglass**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/stamped-from-the-beginning/characters/frederick-douglass) at an abolitionist meeting, Garrison writes the preface to Douglass’ *Narrative of Frederick Douglass* but fills it with racist ideas about how Black people have been destroyed by slavery.

As tensions over slavery escalate, Southern Democrats leave the Democratic Party in the first step toward secession. [**Abraham Lincoln**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/stamped-from-the-beginning/characters/abraham-lincoln) is elected president in 1860, but Douglass refuses to vote for him due to his poor record of protecting Black people’s rights as a congressman in Illinois. When the Civil War begins in 1861, a large number of enslaved people in the South self-emancipate, and many go on to fight for the Union Army. When Lincoln issues the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863, he is hailed as the Great Emancipator, but Garrison critiques it as a halfway measure. In January 1865, the House of Representatives abolishes slavery by passing the Thirteenth Amendment. In April, the Civil War is officially declared over; almost immediately after, Lincoln is assassinated.

During the ensuing Reconstruction period, Black people are accorded a number of rights, including (for Black men) the right to vote with the Fifteenth Amendment, which Garrison celebrates as a “miracle.” However, Southern violence, economic exploitation, and a lack of political will to implement these rights means that Black people remain severely oppressed, with some in conditions that do not differ from slavery. Yet when Reconstruction is eventually declared a failure, many blame Black people themselves.

W. E. B. Du Bois fantasizes about going to Harvard but cannot due to the fact that he is Black. Instead, he enrolls in the country’s most esteemed Black institution, Fisk University. Here, he internalizes assimilationist ideas about Black inferiority. He then goes on to become the first Black person to receive a PhD from Harvard. In 1890, he attends the first Pan-African Conference in London and discusses decolonization with other Black leaders, although at this point he recommends this be a “gradual” process. In 1903, he publishes his most famous work, [***The Souls of Black Folk***](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-souls-of-black-folk), which combines powerful antiracist analysis of Black people’s “double consciousness” with assimilationist ideas about their “simple faith.” He also develops the idea of the “[**Talented Tenth**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/stamped-from-the-beginning/symbols/talented-tenth),” the elite minority of high-achieving Black people who will elevate the status of the race overall through an assimilationist strategy known as uplift suasion.

After the founding of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1909, Du Bois becomes the founding editor of the organization’s journal, *The Crisis*. Although aimed toward advancing the rights and conditions of Black people, the organization is plagued by classism and colorism, as well as assimilationist tendencies. As the “Red Scare” over communism takes hold of the U.S., Du Bois immerses himself in Marxist thought and publishes his most vehemently antiracist book thus far, *Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil* (1920).

In the 1920s, Du Bois becomes deeply involved with the Harlem Renaissance, a Black cultural movement that contains many splits over issues of colorism, elitism, gender, sexuality, assimilation, and antiracism. When the Great Depression grips the U.S. in the 1930s, President Franklin D. Roosevelt makes a compromise with the segregationists in order to pass his New Deal legislation. Following the end of World War II, antiracist efforts gain greater momentum as Americans reel from news of the Holocaust and feel self-conscious of the racism that continues to exist within the country that proclaims to be the “leader of the free world.” As segregation begins to be legally challenged, white Southerners mount a violent campaign of “massive resistance.” Du Bois, meanwhile, travels to a newly decolonized Ghana and celebrates his 94th birthday with Ghanaian revolutionary President [**Kwame Nkrumah**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/stamped-from-the-beginning/characters). Du Bois dies in Ghana the day before Martin Luther King, Jr. delivers his “I Have a Dream” speech.

Angela Davis’s parents raised her with strong socialist and antiracist values in Birmingham, Alabama. As a college student, Davis witnesses the passing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. After Black revolutionary leader [**Malcolm X**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/stamped-from-the-beginning/characters/malcolm-x) is assassinated, Davis gets involved with the emergent Black Power movement, which demands *economic* justice (in addition to social and political justice) for Black people. In 1969, Davis takes her first academic job at UCLA, but California Governor [**Ronald Reagan**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/stamped-from-the-beginning/characters/ronald-reagan) orders that she be removed from her post because she is a member of the Communist Party. After being implicated in the escape attempt of the Soledad Brothers in 1970, Davis is sent to prison, where she develops a “Black feminist consciousness.” Upon her release, she dedicates her life to police and prison abolition.

When [**Richard Nixon**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/stamped-from-the-beginning/characters) runs for president, he promises to restore “law and order” to the country. Meanwhile, political leaders of both parties continue to ramp up funding for police and prisons while cutting welfare spending, particularly after Reagan’s “War on Drugs” in 1982. After Republicans Reagan and [**George H. W. Bush**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/stamped-from-the-beginning/characters) lay the groundwork, Democrat [**Bill Clinton**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/stamped-from-the-beginning/characters) solidifies the implementation of the mass incarceration of Black people.

In the 2000s, American culture is increasingly dominated by “color-blind” and “postracial” discourse, even as the evidence of ongoing racism is extremely apparent. In 2008, [**Barack Obama**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/stamped-from-the-beginning/characters/barack-obama) becomes the first Black president of the U.S., and many choose to view this as evidence that racism has ended. But following the murder of Black teenager [**Trayvon Martin**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/stamped-from-the-beginning/characters) in 2012, a new wave of protest against police brutality and the racist criminal justice system emerges: the #BlackLivesMatter movement. Kendi reflects that rather than trying to persuade or educate racism away, people should focus on eliminating racist policies, because racist ideas are produced to justify these policies.