

An Antiracist Reading List

By Ibram X. Kendi

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No one becomes “not racist,” despite a tendency by Americans to identify themselves that way. We can only strive to be “antiracist” on a daily basis, to continually rededicate ourselves to the lifelong task of overcoming our country’s racist heritage.

We learn early the racist notion that white people have more because they are more; that people of color have less because they are less. I had internalized this worldview by my high school graduation, seeing myself and my race as less than other people and blaming other blacks for racial inequities.

To build a nation of equal opportunity for everyone, we need to dismantle this spurious legacy of our common upbringing. One of the best ways to do this is by reading books. Not books that reinforce old ideas about who we think we are, what we think America is, what we think racism is. Instead, we need to read books that are difficult or unorthodox, that don’t go down easily. Books that force us to confront our self-serving beliefs and make us aware that “I’m not racist” is a slogan of denial.

The reading list below is composed of just such books — a combination of classics, relatively obscure works and a few of recent vintage. Think of it as a stepladder to antiracism, each step addressing a different stage of the journey toward destroying racism’s insidious hold on all of us.

BIOLOGY

FATAL INVENTION

How Science, Politics, and Big Business Re-create Race in the Twenty-First Century

By Dorothy Roberts

No book destabilized my fraught notions of racial distinction and hierarchy — the belief that each race had different genes, diseases and natural abilities — more than this vigorous critique of the “biopolitics of race.” Roberts, a professor at the University of Pennsylvania, shows unequivocally that all people are indeed created equal, despite political and economic special interests that keep trying to persuade us otherwise.

New Press, 2011

THE MORNING: *Make sense of the day's news and ideas. David Leonhardt and Times journalists guide you through what's happening — and why it matters.*
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ETHNICITY

WEST INDIAN IMMIGRANTS A Black Success Story?

By Suzanne Model

Some of the same forces have led Americans to believe that the recent success of black immigrants from the Caribbean proves either that racism does not exist or that the gap between African-Americans and other groups in income and wealth is their own fault. But Model's meticulous study, emphasizing the self-selecting nature of the West Indians who emigrate to the United States, argues otherwise, showing me, a native of racially diverse New York City, how such notions — the foundation of ethnic racism — are unsupported by the facts.

Russell Sage Foundation, 2008

BODY

THE CONDEMNATION OF BLACKNESS Race, Crime, and the Making of Modern Urban America

By Khalil Gibran Muhammad

“Black” and “criminal” are as wedded in America as “star” and “spangled.” Muhammad's book traces these ideas to the late 19th century, when racist policies led to the disproportionate arrest and incarceration of blacks, igniting urban whites' fears and bequeathing tenaciously racist stereotypes.

Harvard University, 2010

CULTURE

THEIR EYES WERE WATCHING GOD

By Zora Neale Hurston

Of course, the black body exists within a wider black culture — one Hurston portrayed with grace and insight in this seminal novel. She defies racist Americans who would standardize the cultures of white people or sanitize, eroticize, erase or assimilate those of blacks.

1937
Editors

BEHAVIOR

THE NEGRO ARTIST AND THE RACIAL MOUNTAIN

By Langston Hughes

“We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame,” Hughes wrote nearly 100 years ago. “We know we are beautiful. And ugly too.” We are all *imperfectly* human, and these imperfections are also markers of human equality.

[The Nation, June 23, 1926](#)

COLOR

THE BLUEST EYE

By Toni Morrison

THE BLACKER THE BERRY

By Wallace Thurman

Beautiful and hard-working black people come in all shades. If dark people have less it is not because they are less, a moral eloquently conveyed in these two classic novels, stirring explorations of colorism.

1970 | 1929

WHITENESS

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF MALCOLM X

By Malcolm X and Alex Haley

DYING OF WHITENESS

How the Politics of Racial Resentment Is Killing America's Heartland

By Jonathan M. Metzl

Malcolm X began by adoring whiteness, grew to hate white people and, ultimately, despised the false concept of white superiority — a killer of people of color. And not only them: low- and middle-income white people too, as Metzl's timely book shows, with its look at Trump-era policies that have unraveled the Affordable Care Act and contributed to rising gun suicide rates and lowered life expectancies.

1965 | Basic Books, 2019

BLACKNESS

LOCKING UP OUR OWN

Crime and Punishment in Black America

By James Forman Jr.

Just as Metzl explains how seemingly pro-white policies are killing whites, Forman explains how blacks themselves abetted the mass incarceration of other blacks, beginning in the 1970s. Amid rising crime rates, black mayors, judges, prosecutors and police chiefs embraced tough-on-crime policies that they promoted as pro-black with tragic consequences for black America.

Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2017 ([Read the review.](#))

CLASS

BLACK MARXISM

The Making of the Black Radical Tradition

By Cedric J. Robinson

Black America has been economically devastated by what Robinson calls racial capitalism. He chastises white Marxists (and black capitalists) for failing to acknowledge capitalism's racial character, and for embracing as sufficient an interpretation of history founded on a European vision of class struggle.

Zed Press, 1983

SPACES

WAITING 'TIL THE MIDNIGHT HOUR A Narrative History of Black Power in America

By Peniel E. Joseph

As racial capitalism deprives black communities of resources, assimilationists ignore or gentrify these same spaces in the name of “development” and “integration.” To be antiracist is not only to promote equity among racial groups, but also among their spaces, something the black power movement of the 1960s and 1970s understood well, as Joseph’s chronicle makes clear.

Holt, 2006

GENDER

HOW WE GET FREE Black Feminism and the Combahee River Collective

Edited by Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor

WELL-READ BLACK GIRL Finding Our Stories, Discovering Ourselves

Edited by Glory Edim

I began my career studying, and too often admiring, activists who demanded black (male) power over black communities, including over black women, whom they placed on pedestals and under their feet. Black feminist literature, including these anthologies, helps us recognize black women “as human, levelly human,” as the Combahee River Collective demanded to be seen in 1977.

Haymarket, 2017 | Ballantine, 2018 ([Read our profile of Glory Edim.](#))

SEXUALITY

REDEFINING REALNESS

My Path to Womanhood, Identity, Love & So Much More

by Janet Mock

SISTER OUTSIDER

Essays and Speeches

by Audre Lorde

I grew up in a Christian household thinking there was something abnormal and immoral about queer blacks. My racialized transphobia made Mock's memoir an agonizing read — just as my racialized homophobia made Lorde's essays and speeches a challenge. But pain often precedes healing.

Atria, 2014 | Crossing Press, 1984

By not running from the books that pain us, we can allow them to transform us. I ran from antiracist books most of my life. But now I can't stop running *after* them — scrutinizing myself and my society, and in the process changing both.

Ibram X. Kendi, a professor and director of the Antiracist Research & Policy Center at American University, is the National Book Award-winning author of "Stamped From the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America" and the forthcoming "How to Be an Antiracist."