MLTALKS: IBRAM X. KENDI
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DANIELLE WOOD:

Hello everyone. Welcome to today’s installment of the MLTalks. My name is Danielle Wood and I serve here as assistant professor at the Media Lab. I started just in January in 2018, so it's my pleasure to be with you. I have the great honor today of hosting Professor Ibram Kendi and I'll share more about his background in a few moments. First, just a few logistics. We welcome everyone who's joining on the webcast and all of those who have come here in person. We will be making this a dialogue. First I'll be asking questions of our guest, but we also expect questions from you in the audience as well. For those who are here in person, we ask that you please write your questions and we have a few volunteers, you guys can stand up, who will take your questions via cards. So if you do have a question, please raise your hand and one of our volunteers who are at the various corners will come and bring you a card. For those who are on the webcast, we invite you to share questions on the hashtag for Twitter using MLTalks, as well as through the Facebook page for the site. And so we'll receive those electronically and take some of the key themes from our electronic questions and discuss those as well. So hope you guys are ready for an educational but also inspiring discussion. You guys ready? Thanks for being here. Here at the Media Lab we use the MLTalks series as a way to identify and really focus on some of the key issues of our time that affect both our research and our lives as citizens. So that's why I'm so glad today to have our guest. Professor Ibram Kendi, who is an award-winning historian and New York Times bestselling author. Many of you know him for the book that I'm holding today for which he won the National Book Award. Stamped from the Beginning, the subtitle reads, The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America. We'll be discussing this book today as well as his overall research field. And currently he serves as a professor of history and international relations at American University. There he is the founding director of the Antiracist Research and Policy Center at American University. And part of our discussion will be exploring the impact he's envisioning through this policy center. He's a regular contributor to the New York Times and to The Atlantic. You can find his writing both in longer form and shorter form easily in many venues. I also want to highlight his first book that came out in 2012 called The Black Campus Movement: Black Students and the Racial Reconciliation of Higher Education. So we benefit from his deep understanding of various aspects of racist and antiracist thinking as well as activism and response to racist ideas. So this book that we'll discuss today I have found personally very helpful as I'm formulating our research team here at the Media Lab and we'll discuss that as well as part of our dialogue. I look forward also to the next book that you have in mind that you've also shared a title with us. It's called, How to Be an Antiracist. So I think the series is really going to help us both look backwards and look forward in our own work. As a personal, I think you know this, my brother Kinian who first recommended that I read your book, in fact, really he pestered me for a number of months because I was busy and I hadn't gotten around to it. And so every time he saw me he would ask if I had read your book yet, and now I understand why. As soon as I started reading I became engrossed in this history and realized how it would change my thinking I too became an evangelist and now I'm pestering my students and friends and family to also please read the book because it's something that we need in this time and to make progress in our life. So thank you for that. So my goal today is to start with some person reflection on what's motivated you in your work, particularly thinking about your parents. And you share in your online writing to your parents are coming out of a period of activism themselves and how do you feel they translated their life of activism to you and in your work?

IBRAM KENDI:
Sure, well first I'd like to thank you, Danielle, and thank you all for coming. It's truly an honor for me to be here, to be here talking about my work and really larger issues of race in our society. To your question, I'm not sure if all of you know, but I think a few days ago a theologian by the name of James Cone passed away. He was a long-time theologian at Union Theological Seminary and in the spring of 1971 my father went up to one of his classes to sit in and after the class he asked Professor Cone, “What is your definition of a Christian?” And so my father had sort of joined the church a few years before and Professor Cone responded, “A Christian is someone who is striving for liberation.” And so my father took that definition and my mother sort of received a similar definition as well at the same time and they actually met during what was known as the Black Theology Movement in which they were sort of taking the teachings of Christianity to advance the lives of Black people and the lives of humanity. And so they, of course, nurtured me in those ideas and I think those ideas were critical and really foundational to all of the work that I still do.

DANIELLE WOOD:

But you didn't jump straight into activism, right? Before you became a famous scholar who's deep in history you had a few other directions you explored. What helped you go from, initially, I think sports journalism, right, into history of race.

IBRAM KENDI:

Yeah, so one of the things I joke about is so I grew up in Jamaica, Queens. Huge New York Knicks fan, huge John Starks fan if anybody who knows about 90s NBA, and I wanted to play in the NBA like many teenagers in New York City. It just so happened that I grew up and joined a different NBA that I sort of had no, the National Book Awards that I had no sort of sense of and I think what actually happened was initially I realized, OK, I probably am not going to be able to make the NBA, so then when I overcame that then I was like, you know what, I want to enter into sports journalism. And I did a bunch of internships and got to meet a bunch of professional athletes and I realized, you know what, these people sort of breathe the same way we do and are just normal people. And so like, you know, I think I was sort of drawn to getting to know these people and you know, and I think that, I don't want to say I was let down in a way, because people are people, all right, no matter how famous they are, but I think concomitantly I also became more interested in racial issues, particularly during my junior and senior year at Florida A&M University. And so as I was sort of becoming more alienated from sports journalism I became more drawn to journalism concerning race. And I went to grad school thinking I would be a race and ethnicity reporter, and then I was drawn to the life of a professor. I didn't know about the academic politics yet, but, initially I was drawn to that life, yeah.

DANIELLE WOOD:

Thank you for sharing. I'm glad the audience can kind of see a little bit into your journey, because now actually I want to invite the audience to join us in a classroom for a few moments. Do you guys mind taking a class for a few minutes with us? I want to make sure that as we continue our discussion we're really benefiting from the rigor that is in this book. It's not just a list of stories or a series of examples of people in history, it's actually a highly rigorous and critical way of approaching thinking that literally changes the way that I go through my daily life because now I can draw from your definitions of ways of thinking of being antiracist, segregationist, and assimilationist and it helps me cope with the difficulties that I see in my day. So let's please start by making sure the audience is all caught up on these key definitions that are really the foundation of your book.

IBRAM KENDI:

OK, so I think first and foremost I think we're in a time in which we've been led to believe that the central contrast is between a racist and a not racist. Anybody know what I'm talking about? All the
Americans who say I'm not racist. I live next to a person who says he's the least racist person you've ever met, you've ever interviewed, you've ever known. I live in Washington D.C. And so we have been led to believe that there's sort of two categories: racist and not racist. But really when we think about not racist that has no philosophical or historical basis. Like, what is a not racist? What is the history of not racism? And so instead in Stamped from the Beginning I actually draw a contrast between racist and antiracist ideas that really every person, every idea, and every policy is either racist or antiracist. And I define a racist idea in particular as any idea that suggests a racial group is superior or inferior to another racial group in any way. And so racist ideas connote racial hierarchy, while antiracist ideas connote, anybody want to take a guess? Racial equality, right. And so there's no neutrality, right. Any idea either connotes hierarchy or equality.

DANIELLE WOOD:
And let me just pause 'cause my favorite summary of this from the book, which is a quote, what he's saying is there's nothing wrong with Black people.

IBRAM KENDI:
Yeah.

DANIELLE WOOD:
That's literally what he's saying.

IBRAM KENDI:
Pretty much, or when you express that there's something wrong with Black people or really any other racial group, that is a connotation basically that's a racist idea. And so then what makes it a little bit more complex is that really there are two kinds of racist ideas. Segregationist ideas and assimilationist ideas. Anybody here heard of the nature versus nurture debate? So actually racial theorists have been having that debate as well, and so segregationists historically have stated that in the case of Black people that they are inferior by nature. Assimilationists have made the case that Black people are inferior by nurture. Another way to understand the differences is, segregationists have historically stated that there's a biological racial hierarchy. In other words, White people are genetically superior. Their genes predispose them to intelligence or other sort of behavioral traits while assimilationists reject notions of biological hierarchy and state we are all created equal, but then they state that Black people are culturally inferior or they state Black people are behaviorally inferior and so they root those inferior behaviors whether criminality, laziness, unintelligence either in culture or in a discriminatory environment, which I think makes it even more complex. In other words, assimilationist, the more progressive ones, state that Black people are not inferior biologically or even culturally, but they do have behavioral deficiencies because they were raised in poverty. So Black people are disproportionately poor and they pass on these sort of negative traits on to the generations. Or they're inferior because they were raised in segregation. Or they are inferior because slavery wasn't just dehumanizing, it literally made Black people into brutes. And so as you can see, segregationists and assimilationists have been arguing over why Black people are inferior. Both of whom believe in Black inferiority, which is a racist idea, while antiracists have been like, y'all are crazy, the racial groups are equal.

DANIELLE WOOD:
And I just have to pause and note that before I read the book if you had asked me, do I think that Black people were caused to have inferior behavior due to slavery I probably would have said yes because it seems like a logical relationship. So only as I saw this very subtle distinction that you laid out that I started to realize my own racist ideas, especially assimilationist ideas.
IBRAM KENDI:
Yeah, what's ironic is when we actually look at the historical data, meaning we look at the way newly freed Africans were operating in the South we see people who were building schools, who were building communities, who were building churches, who were doing all of the things that brutes don't do, while us simultaneously assuming that slavery sort of made them into subhumans. I'll never forget a quote from an enslaved person who was asked sort of, aren't you going to now have a problem now that you're free? And I'm paraphrasing it, and the person stated, actually the slave owners are going to have the problem because we did everything for them.

DANIELLE WOOD:
Let's continue, 'cause there's more good examples to add, and so the structure of the book is that you've laid out these five tour guides or key historical figures who provide us, really by their leadership they affected greatly that era in which they lived and they also are intertwined with a network of other people who are other characters where they give us this great sense of anchoring. I'll just briefly, since I know you've summarized this many times I'll briefly summarize the five tour guides, but I'm going to ask you to speak particularly about Du Bois and Angela Davis, so we'll come back to you. But I'll just provide the other names. The first is Cotton Mather who served as a Puritan minister and leader and academic and so he is starting us at the beginning of this part of American history and for me, my understanding is, represents combinations of both segregationist and assimilationist thinking and so we start on one side where two kinds of racist thought are really highlighted and are really the foundation, especially of this regional kind of community building and it is the part of the country that is setting forth the foundation for our intellectual aspirations.

IBRAM KENDI:
Definitely.

DANIELLE WOOD:
Going forward. Next we come in with Thomas Jefferson who you describe was the antislavery anti-abolitionist leader which means there's obviously a conflict there and sense of tension. And so we can talk later about how it is that as an important leader who owned slaves but who constantly said he wished how he could end slavery or see it ended really had this tension inside of him. You continue with William Lloyd Garrison and of course now we have someone who truly is an abolitionist, who edits a periodical called The Liberator and who really is on fire for the cause of abolition. However, even though I always look for heroes in the stories we have to also consider that some of the actual words and ideas expressed by this ardent abolitionist really are racist, especially in the assimilationist vein. We continue from there and then we introduce two additional characters, especially W.E.B Du Bois and Angela Davis and I have to say as I was going through the book at some point I just wanted to say, is anybody going to be antiracist? Is anyone? 'Cause throughout the story you find direct quotes and direct direct actions by people and analytically, clearly show the racist content. And so at some point I was desperate for the examples and I was happy when Zora Neale Hurston showed up because she finally had something to say that was not racist, but can you take us for a bit through the art as you think about the flow from Cotton Mather up to Angela Davis. It seems to go from negative to positive. Is that how you view it? And then reflect more on the last two please.

IBRAM KENDI:
Sure, so I think that when we think of colonial America and colonial period, which of course for New England began in the 1630s and we think about science or even intelligence we're really thinking about theology. And so theologians sort of dominated the intellectual culture during this period and the most prominent colonial American theologian hands-down was Cotton Mather. And Cotton Mather, his
grandfather Richard Mather was critical in the founding of Harvard. His father was a long-time president of Harvard. Cotton Mather was upset 'cause Harvard didn't name him president. He also, Cotton Mather, was critical in the founding of, I should say, the renaming of Yale. And so the Mathers really had their footprint on the intellectual sort of culture of this area as well as Cotton Mather published, according to his biographers, more than all of his American contemporaries combined. That's how prolific he was. He was the first member of the Royal Society, which at the time was the most distinguished intellectual society in the English speaking world. So he, in terms of this sort of tension between segregationist and assimilationist thought, he was simultaneously seeking to substantiate slavery but then open up enslaved Africans to the gospel.

**DANIELLE WOOD:**
And he owned slaves himself, is that right?

**IBRAM KENDI:**
Yes, he was proud to. Actually he was rewarded by his church with a captive. And so the way he resolved this tension was the Pauline doctrine of this split between the body and the soul. And so the body was permanently inferior and worthy of enslavement, but the soul has the capacity to be civilized and developed based on the environment. The soul, according to Mather, and I'm quoting him directly, has the capacity to become white. And so he often talking about making Black souls white, meaning Christian, meaning white. And so I wanted to sort of show how his efforts to convince slave owners that you can minister to Black people while keeping them enslaved was a very critical sort of intervention during the period, during the period in which theology sort of dominated. And theology and theologians did not really start becoming more marginal until the emergence of the United States and more intellectuals like Thomas Jefferson, who as many of you know wasn't the most religious type of person. And so really I show how through Thomas Jefferson racist ideas became less theological and sort of more political. And I then show the ways in which Garrison in particular, and other abolitionists sort of wielded racist ideas to meet Americans where they were and then take them where they wanted to go, which was antislavery thought. And of course they were pushing against proslavery theorists who were also wielding racist ideas. I say racist ideas like Garrison was well known for making the case that slavery had made black people into brutes and sort of shocking Americans, like this system is so brutal these people are nothing but brutes, but we have the capacity to cultivate, civilize, and develop them and make them become human if we, of course, get rid of slavery, which is a very powerful argument at the time and then of course I think I wanted to then show the life of racist ideas and antiracist ideas, particularly when Black intellectuals became more prominent in the American intellectual scene. And probably the first major prominent Black intellectual was of course W.E.B Du Bois. And I sort of also wanted to show the ways in which his famed double consciousness was in fact a double consciousness of antiracist and assimilationist ideas. And so I try to sort of show that through his life, but then by the time of the 1930s he had adopted a more antiracist consciousness, a consciousness that Angela Davis in particular sort of adopted and was able to sort of carry on through the better part of her life.

**DANIELLE WOOD:**
Thank you, if you guys caught that that was about 300, 400 years of history, so thank you for that powerful summary. We're gonna tease that part a bit more, but that was the whole book, so good. Let me pause 'cause I wanna spend more time on the life of Du Bois, and particularly because we can tell in terms of fact we can talk about the struggles he had getting recognition in these elite academic institutions.

**IBRAM KENDI:**
Sure.
DANIELLE WOOD: And on that side it becomes a story of just admiration. But you take us further than that to really critically think about the particular features of his thought at different eras. Can you speak more both about his achievements academically as well as the thought processes.

IBRAM KENDI: Sure, so some have argued, I shouldn't say argued. Some have made the case that a book entitled Uncle Tom's Cabin was the best, no, the second-best seller of the 19th century behind, anybody want to take a guess? The Bible of course, which is kind of. And so this book was very critical not only in American thought but racial thought and particularly in New England. And Du Bois, of course, was born and raised in Eastern Massachusetts where New England thought was as prominent as it was, I should say Western Massachusetts where it was as prominent as on the eastern side. What was critical in terms of her text and her idea was this sort of contrast between the hard European and the soft African. This idea was an idea that Du Bois sort of consumed and when he graduated, for instance, from Harvard and gave a sort of commencement address he actually gave a commencement address on Jefferson Davis who he presented as this archetypal hard European and then sort of contrasted him with this sort of soft African. At the time he believed that the races were biological entities like the vast majority of Americans. It wasn't really until the early, 'til he came upon an anthropologist by the name of Franz Boas who made the case and would spend his life making the case that from a racial standpoint the races were biologically the same, that he sort of began to change.

DANIELLE WOOD: Let's come back to the anthropology later.

IBRAM KENDI: Exactly.

DANIELLE WOOD: That's a good note.

IBRAM KENDI: And so he had this sort of biological sense, but then he also had this sense that Europe or European thought, whether that was what he received from his training at Harvard or his training at the University of Berlin, which in the 1890s was the most prestigious university in the Western world, he considered and had been led to believe that this was the pinnacle of human thought. And he saw himself as demonstrating the capability of Black people to master the best of human thought. It wasn't until later in his life that he began to categorize this thought as European thought and not sort of universalize it and also began to recognize African thought or other types of thoughts around the world. To give an example, when Franz Boas came to his campus in Atlanta in 1906 to speak about precolonial African civilizations like Ghana, Mali, and Songhai, Du Bois was shocked and he writes in a later text that it sort of awoke him from the paralysis of his own judgment that Africa had no history.

DANIELLE WOOD: Wow.

IBRAM KENDI: This was three years after The Souls of Black Folk. So he wrote The Souls of Black Folk thinking African people had no history.
DANIELLE WOOD:
Let's pause and let that sink in because it's one of the books that so many of us turn to as this early tome that we can take pride in and think of a sense of self in our own historical literature in the U.S. And yet it has this racist idea built in that there was nothing happening in Africa, no thoughts.

IBRAM KENDI:
And I think many people sort of have heard interpretations of double consciousness, but they haven't necessarily read the text very closely, and if you read the text the early essay, the first essay in The Souls of Black Folk what he is essentially saying is that A, that Black people, that there's such thing as the Negro, and Negro culture and that I value and we should value and America should value that culture, but he's simultaneously stated that basically I am looking at myself from the eyes of others. And that is not a bad thing. And so essentially he's judging Black people from the standards of White people and he viewed that as actually a good thing because what he was seeking to do was essentially take the hard, sophisticated European and create this sort of unifying sort of human body with the soft, joyful, spiritual African. So like, you know the best of both races could sort of come together and he thought it was coming together in himself, but then it was simultaneously creating a double consciousness which of course he lamented about.

DANIELLE WOOD:
And let me push because as we go quickly, you just said some nice things about African people. Can you tell me what some of the harm is in that way of thinking?

IBRAM KENDI:
Well I mean, if you sort of standardize, let's say if you say the greatest of intellectuals in the world have trained in Cambridge and in Berlin, and then you say I know of a Black person who's done that what you're doing is you're standardizing a sort of intellect and then stating Black people are capable of that. And really that debate about Black capability is fundamentally the debate between segregationists and assimilationists 'cause segregationists have long said Black people are not capable of learning Greek and Latin, of going to MIT and Harvard, of going to the University of Berlin, it's impossible. While assimilationists are like, no, they actually can learn Greek and Latin. They can learn Shakespeare. They can learn sophisticated European literature. And look at this person who has demonstrated that and in learning so that demonstrates they are intelligent. And so you standardize intelligence as sort of European literature instead of saying, you know what, there are multiple forms of intelligence just like there are multiple forms of literature. And so he wanted to prove to the West what Black people were capable of. Eventually he realized that after he, of course, ascended, sort of, the mountaintop of European thought that you know what, there's another mountaintop. And he began the rest of his career trying to express that mountaintop to the world.

DANIELLE WOOD:
This is a good time to pause and bring in the idea of the extraordinary Negro, 'cause he just defined it, but I want to highlight that title, right. So he just pointed out either you believe that a few Black people might be able to achieve these high levels of achievement, and if so, then people like Du Bois become the exception to the rule, but the rule is the racist problem. The rule says, most Black people can't, but may a few will, and I think you also trace, really, the beginning of that term and activities such as exhibition. Can you explain those as well?

IBRAM KENDI:
Sure, so I think I had in the 1790s, which was when there was a growing free Black population in the new United States because of Black people running away during the American Revolution and also slave owners taking things like freedom seriously. I'm sorry, I just can't say that without laughing. And so of course they manumitted some, or if not all of their captives. And so there was this growing free Black population, particularly in the North, and so then that caused abolitionists, particularly White abolitionists to say to these freed Blacks that the way they act and behave before White people will determine whether abolitionism will succeed. In other words, they made the case that it's upon you, free Blacks, to always act in an upstanding manner before White people to show White people what you're capable of. This strategy I call uplift suasion in the text and I sort of track its history. And so these abolitionists made the case as you perform in a positive way you will undermine the racist ideas that White people have about Black people and then you will then undermine the racist policies that they believe those ideas were stemming from. And so they encouraged Black people to not drink. I mean, there was all of these sort of advice tracts that they circulated in Black communities. What was ironic about uplift suasion is first and foremost it was impossible for Black people to execute, just like it's impossible for any group to execute because they're human, they're gonna make mistakes. They're gonna have their lazy days. They're gonna have all different types of negativities and positives operating in a single body just like in a single community, so it was impossible to execute. But secondly, when Black people somehow did manage to execute it, they were rendered extraordinary. So in other words, they were cast aside as, you're not like those ordinary, inferior Black people. You are the exception, you are extraordinary. And we saw this of course with Barack Obama and others in recent decades. And so the strategy therefore failed. The very reason was to convince people, but then those people cast those people aside as extraordinary. Also, and I think this was the most difficult finding of this strategy, 'cause this is a very popular strategy and it still is a very popular strategy within communities of color, particularly within the Black community, anybody know what I'm talking about?

**DANIELLE WOOD:**

How many were told by your parents, you better dress right for that interview because they'll think you might be gangsta.

**IBRAM KENDI:**

So essentially--

**DANIELLE WOOD:**

You had that, right?

**IBRAM KENDI:**

You have the race on your shoulder whenever you're entering into majority White spaces. So you have to act right so they won't thing wrong about Black people. And you know that's what Black people are constantly taught. The problem with this strategy that has been passed down through the generations is that it's actually based on a racist idea. So this popular antiracist strategy, well-meaning strategy has been based on a racist idea. And to make a long story short about how it is, basically to suggest that Black behavior, negative behavior is partly responsible for the existence of White people's racist ideas. That other words if you act right they'll think right about you. That is suggesting that Black people bear some sort of responsibility in the racist ideas that White people have about them and to suggest that Black people bear some sort of responsibility is to suggest that there's some truth in notions of Black inferiority. And to suggest there's some notions of truth is to express a racist idea.

**DANIELLE WOOD:**
That's very heavy because on one hand, we can easily lightly throughout our day adopt some of these behaviors almost for survival. You might just think, well, I don't want to create a negative stereotype or propagate one so let me take a choice to kind of fit in, and yet you're pointing out that what's more important here is that I can first love myself and realize there's nothing wrong with me, and second, fight against a long history of racist thought. But it's challenging.

IBRAM KENDI:
And fundamentally, to recognize that as an individual person that you are not responsible in any way for the racist ideas that other people may or may not have about you. You bear no responsibility. The responsibility is completely on them. And so that then frees you, you know, it liberates you to just go about your day and be human, to be yourself and to not think that if you act in some sort of negative manner you're bringing down the race.

DANIELLE WOOD:
That is good, that is freeing. And so we've been thinking about Du Bois and his transformation, I think you really do show powerful antiracist thinking in the end of his career. Can you just summarize that briefly?

IBRAM KENDI:
Sure, so I think in particular by the 1930s he's writing essays like On Being Ashamed in The Crisis, which was of course the periodical of the NAACP that he founded and long edited. And in this piece he's making the case that too many Black people are ashamed of their own blackness. You know they have what we now call self-hate or what I in the book call racist ideas or internalized racism and that because Black people are ashamed of themselves and their own race, because they've internalized these ideas they're not willing to associate with other Black people. They're constantly trying to basically become White. And he talked in particular about the NAACP's leader at the time, a guy by the name of Walter White who could pass for White and he talked about, I don't know of any Black friends that he has. I don't know of any Black associations that he has. He's basically White, and he used him as an example of Black people who were basically striving to be White, who were essentially sort of guided by in the text what I call assimilationist ideas. And so he critiqued that. And so therefore he was critiquing himself and his own personal history. He also was stating that because Black people view White spaces, White schools, White institutions, White communities as superior, that was, he believed, partly what was driving integration. And so he advocated that you know what, let's not integrate based on this idea that we're integrating into a superior space, which of course was also very difficult for Black people to understand because, at least those black people who were striving to get into what they considered to be superior spaces. He also in the 1920s began reading very deeply the work of Karl Marx and so by the 1930s he began to recognize the relationship between capitalism and racism and the way in which they have long fed on each other. And he of course, the New Deal, like for many Americans brought him more in tune with trying to understand class and economic dynamics in the United States.

DANIELLE WOOD:
So let's then look at your fifth tour guide and speak about Angela Davis. I have to pause and just ask, why is there only one woman tour guide? I get that there weren't as many, but I mean, there's Sojourner Truth and there's Maria Stewart who I discovered was the first Black woman who here in New England gave a public talk to a mixed crowd of male and female. And I know they didn't all write as much, but if you could talk about that first and then talk about Angela's contributions.

IBRAM KENDI:
Sure, so I think in terms of, part of it was in choosing the five characters I wanted to choose someone whose ideas were very sort of central to a number of different debates about race that was going on between segregationists and assimilationists, or assimilationists and antiracists. I also wanted people whose lifetimes sort of spanned a particular critical period. And so Cotton Mather was colonial America. Jefferson was the lead-up to the American Revolution, to the eve of the abolitionist movement. Garrison was abolitionist movement to the end of Reconstruction. Du Bois lived 400 years, so it was from the end of Reconstruction to the eve of the march on Washington when he died and then Angela Davis from then to today. I considered Harriet Beecher Stowe instead of William Lloyd Garrison. The difficulty is her lifetime did not fit in terms of the trajectory of the text, but I think you see that her ideas sort of spanned both the Garrison and Du Bois chapters.

DANIELLE WOOD:
Yeah, and there's plenty of discussion of the role of the book.

IBRAM KENDI:
Precisely.

DANIELLE WOOD:
Uncle Tom's Cabin, yeah.

IBRAM KENDI:
And so I think that that's why. I don't think women, to a certain extent, I don't know, you can correct me if I'm wrong, it's one thing when you're not in a book on antiracist ideas, it's another thing where you're not in a book on racist ideas. You know, dominant characters. But of course I wanted a Black woman, in particular, to have a seismic sort of role in the text. And Angela Davis in particular really sort of fit the mould of a person who throughout her life was able to maintain antiracist ideas in all of their complexities and even all of their intersections. And what I mean by intersections is when I defined a racist idea is any idea that suggests a racial group is superior or inferior to another racial group. What I mean by racial group, is I'm not just talking about, like say, Black people or Asian people or Native American people. When I'm talking about a racial group, Black women are a racial group. Latina women are a racial group. The Asian poor are a racial group. White gays are a racial group. So there's a difference when you say gays and when you say White gays. When you put a racial, you're racializing a particular group and when we look at the history of these ideas, particularly anti-Black racist ideas you see racist ideas being created for Black women, Black men, Black poor, Black elites, Black gays and lesbians, all of these different Black groups even racialized ethnicities: African-Americans, Nigerian-Americans, and so on and so forth. So Angela Davis had the capacity early on to not only recognize the racial groups meta as equal, but she also had long been an advocate of the equality of Black men and Black women just as she was an advocate of the equality of White women and Black women. And she also was a longtime defender of the Black poor, who of course had been vilified over the last 50 years. Also, she was a firm antiracist defender of teenage Black girls, who are also a racialized group that have been targeted. She's also been a critical antiracist defender of Black people accused of crimes and her work in particular fighting the prison industrial complex or mass incarceration she was doing it before it became popular, right. As early as the early 1970s she's been on the front lines. And so I think finally in terms of her role, her principle role in fighting against racism within the criminal justice system, which of course is a very popular, necessarily so, discussion and activity right now, was also a reason why, I think, she was included as a major character as well.

DANIELLE WOOD:
That's great. And so we've addressed these five major characters. I want to give a few examples of some of the more minor characters that stood out to me and ask for your thoughts on them and then we'll continue with more thematic discussion.

IBRAM KENDI:
OK.

DANIELLE WOOD:
So I wanted to ask, can you summarize for us, you give an example of one of the key doctors that helped establish American gynecology and the racist idea that was the foundation for that science, and I just think it's a great vignette that shows how a racist idea became a racist action that led to fame and fortune for a White doctor and for benefits for White women, but literally caused physical harm to Black women. Can you share that please?

IBRAM KENDI:
So yeah, there was this physician by the name of J. Marion Sims. And for those of you who hasn't seen the recent headlines, he had a statue dedicated to him opposite the American, I believe, Medical Association, one of the major medical groups, their offices in Manhattan. He had his statue right across from their offices for the longest. It recently was taken down. J. Marion Sims was a physician in the South who like many physicians at the time recognized that there was this ailment that women who were pregnant suffer through. And so he of course wanted to sort of figure out the cure and he therefore was able to acquire a number of enslaved Black women and perform a number of surgeries on their genitalia and he never gave them anesthesia, making the case like other doctors to this day that Black people are less susceptible to pain and so...

DANIELLE WOOD:
That's the particular racist idea we want to highlight.

IBRAM KENDI:
Yeah.

DANIELLE WOOD:
Whether it's spoken or just thought, this is a belief that he had or wanted to act on for whatever reason.

IBRAM KENDI:
And that idea stems from this idea that Black people are physically superior beings like animals, and so when we think of the racial hierarchy it's not really just White over Black to quote a famous book. Actually Black people are constantly compared to animals. And so that's how historically racist theorists can make the case that Black people are physically superior, close to the most physically superior beings on Earth who are animals while simultaneously intellectually inferior to apparently the most intellectual superior beings on Earth, which were White people. And we see that operating today. Black people can't do work in STEMs, but they're great in athletics, right? So he stated that he did not want to give these women anesthesia because they could sort of handle it. And they were handling it, but then when you read some of his writings, particularly his memoir, you read him documenting how these women were basically screaming in pain during his procedure. And so it's an example of a time in which should we really be believing the racist idea that somebody is using to justify whatever practice because sometimes they know what they're saying is not true because they witnessed it themselves. These women screaming in agony as he performed constant surgery, one woman I think he did surgery on over 10 times, a woman
by the name of Anarcha. He eventually was able, using these women, to figure out how to heal this ailment. Moved to New York, became the founder of gynecology, built the first women's hospital, and has been raised since as one of the greatest medical doctors in American history, which is why there's a statue, or there was a statue across from the American Medical Association in New York.

**DANIELLE WOOD:**
So the book is full of these kinds of stories that kinda take something that we think of naively as a story of someone being intelligent and effective, but there's underlying racist thought that is part of the history, and I have to admit that because I was reading the book and taking in story after story like this I went through a real grief process in reading some periods of seeing either institutions or people that I might have thought of as positive and discovering aspects of their character I didn't respect. Surprises where I didn't know some of these historical events happened and wondering why had I not either read it or pursued it or been exposed to it before. Of course there were times of gratitude as well where certain characters really overcame amazing challenges.

**IBRAM KENDI:**
Definitely.

**DANIELLE WOOD:**
And this admiration for those who really achieved the antiracist thought. But it was in many ways an emotional roller coaster to go through these things. And I want to still get two more examples. Can you speak of some of the slaves who led revolts that tried to sort of bring together either the Christian theology or their own antiracist thinking and galvanize other slaves to believe them, that they were worthy of pursuing revolt.

**IBRAM KENDI:**
Sure, so I won't mention Nat Turner because of the many people who have heard of Nat Turner. I'll mention another leader of a slave revolt by the name of Denmark Vesey. Denmark Vesey was a free Black person in Charleston, South Carolina and in the early 1820s he organized what some reports have stated upwards of 9,000 free and enslaved Black people in and around Charleston, South Carolina to wage a revolt against the local slave holding force in Charleston. The plan, according to reports, was to basically gain control of the city and then use boats to travel to Haiti. Haiti, of course, had been liberated a few decades earlier. The plot was uncovered or told to one of the area White leaders by a captive who then was rewarded with his freedom and captives. But Denmark Vesey and his image sort of lived on and it lives on to this day. To give an example, Denmark Vesey was one of the founders of the church in Charleston that that shooter decided to go and kill nine people who were doing Bible study. I think it was in 2015, so it was a very historic AME church and there's a reason why he chose that church, you know, because of its progressive history.

**DANIELLE WOOD:**
And what is your interpretation of the ability of leaders of revolts like these to really contain these antiracist thoughts long enough to coordinate and to convince others to follow them?

**IBRAM KENDI:**
So typically in the organizing of slave revolts part of the process that Denmark Vesey and others, one of the things they had to deal with was that some of the captives had consumed racist ideas, whether those racist ideas were that Black people were the cursed descendants of Ham, whether those racist ideas that Black people are destined forever for freedom. And so he had to really be an evangelist to certain segments of Black people that, you know what, they could become free. Now, I should say some,
because it's not, he probably did not have to do this for the majority because I think Black people then as they do now recognize that slavery wasn't a choice. If anybody knows what I'm talking about. But there certainly were people who he had to sort of speak about, for instance, the exodus from Egypt. And so how is it that you're justifying, or these people are justifying slavery using the Bible and you know, this Bible is saying we should be free. And one thing I wanted to sort of say about that is in researching this history and writing it I began to sort of think about who racist ideas are primarily meant for, and I think I started to sort of think about this, particularly when I got to the antebellum, post-American Revolution period between the Civil War in which I saw constantly, and you'll see this in the book, the production of racist ideas for Black consumption. So Black people won't run away, so they won't resist slavery so they won't join slave revolts. Because fundamentally, what racists ideas do to people is it causes them to not see a problem with racial disparities or inequities whether that's slavery or mass incarceration and so therefore it doesn't, they're not gonna resist it 'cause they can't even see it as even a problem itself. And so the very people who are most likely to resist it, if you can convince them that they should be slaves, that they should be impoverished, that they should be incarcerated, then you're going to basically be able to maintain those policies.

DANIELLE WOOD:

Yeah, and some of the examples that I noted as I was thinking about some of the key one-liners that people might have promulgated, some slavers would say that well, these are actually volunteers. That somehow they volunteered to be here and that's why they're here. Or they come from a just war. I think that was from John Locke. That the reason that they were captures was there was a fair fight between two powers and, well, all's fair in love and war, right? Or that ultimately we're thankful that people had access to slavery because eventually they were brought from a dark place into the U.S. and that way they could be exposed to Christianity and European culture.

IBRAM KENDI:

Oh yeah.

DANIELLE WOOD:

So all of these, I think, are circulated and it's easy to get confused about them. I think it's the story of Phillis Wheatley, and she's a great example as a poet who was brought as a slave here to this area and who was treated as a daughter, really, in a family and kind of adopted, but was still enslaved. She was super smart and learned quickly and was able to write beautiful poetry and ultimately had to do this kind of trial like a PhD defense to prove that it was indeed her poetry.

IBRAM KENDI:

Yeah.

DANIELLE WOOD:

And when I first discovered her writing years ago I just thought, wow, it's wonderful for me to see a woman who was writing poetry at this time in history. And then I get to your book. You ruined Phillis Wheatley for me, I'm sorry.

IBRAM KENDI:

I'm sorry.

DANIELLE WOOD:

Would you like to share why, why we have to be a little more careful in trying to understand the racist ideas even within Phillis Wheatley's work.
IBRAM KENDI:

So Phillis Wheatley, who we suspect was about seven years old when she was purchased by a local family who then at the time was mourning the death of a former daughter who was about seven years old when she died. And so then biographers and historians have made the case that Phillis reminded them of this daughter who they had lost and so they, therefore, tried to treat her as a daughter even though she was enslaved and part of that treatment was by educating her. And so one of Cotton Mather's descendants, for instance, was one of her tutors and so they educated her and of course they educated her in Greek and Latin, which was considered intelligence in literature at the time. Her parents not only taught her Greek and literature. Greek and Latin, Greek and literature. Greek and Latin, but also made the case that this was knowledge, in other words, the smartest people in the world knew Greek and Latin. She was seven years old, of course she consumed those ideas and by the time she mastered it and used it in her poetry in some of her poems she was saying that, you know what, I am a demonstration that Black people could come from that barbaric place and become civilized. This is sort of the connotation she was writing in her poetry because that's all she had been taught by her parents, and she didn't know the sophisticated literature that she left behind in the Senegambian region.

DANIELLE WOOD:

So I think we can still celebrate, obviously, the survival that she achieved and the beauty of her thought. It's just now I look at everything with a little bit more complexity thanks to your help.

IBRAM KENDI:

And she was used, I describe, I think, the chapter's entitled Black Exhibits because she was used by abolitionists to show what Black people are capable of if we only free them. And so you had all these, quote, extraordinary Black people being exhibited before White America to sort of show what Black people were capable of, but then uplift suasion emerged and basically told every single Black person you are to serve as a Black exhibit.

DANIELLE WOOD:

So we're going to transition a bit now. I want to remind you that for those here in the room, if you'd like to write a question we have a couple volunteers, so now's a good time to raise your hand and they'll bring you a paper. And I have some key thematic questions to discuss while we're collecting questions. I was just thinking about the kinds of ideas that I had to really confess. I think that's one of the words you like to use, as my own racist thinking and start to practice moving on from, and so I wanted to mention a few and kind of ask, how do you see them playing out today? Although I'm going to be careful 'cause historians sometimes tell me I shouldn't just take things from the past and flop them onto today. So you help me with that. But I'll just confess my own challenges here. There's many times when I can believe in uplift suasion where either myself personally or from colleagues or family I sometimes believe that if they could behave better that that would sort of reduce negative outcomes that we see on the racial scale. I sometimes am tempted to kind of harness these standards of measurement from one racial group and apply them to another. I also appreciate that so many of the ideas you present in the book, they show us the origin of things that are really key in our life that we may not notice where they came from. For example, Jim Crow is a term we use to talk about an era of Civil Rights struggle, but really the word comes form the minstrel character. And so even the original origins that you describe of basically White people acting in blackface as a way to demonstrate a particular style of Black person they wanted to show, all of that is going into my own assimilationist thinking, especially. Can you comment on how we can take these discoveries in ourselves and then heal from them and try to move forward.

IBRAM KENDI:
So I mean, I think what you experienced is precisely what I experienced sort of researching and writing this book. I talk about in an early part of the book I think I write that fooled by racist ideas I didn't realize that the only thing wrong with Black people is that we think something is wrong with Black people. And the only thing extraordinary about White people is they think something's extraordinary about White people. And so for me I had to sort of address many of these ideas that I had consumed and I think the way that I was able to do it was not only drawing that very hard line on what is a racist idea, and I say drawing that hard line because historically what we have sought to do is we wanted to believe whatever we wanted to believe about a particular racial group and then define our own ideas outside of racism. So our own internal definitions are constantly shifting based on whatever we believe. So we refuse to take a hard line on this is a racist idea and this is an antiracist idea. And so I think first and foremost for us to take that hard line, I mean, does it make sense to constantly change the definition based on what we believe? That means that there is no definition, right. And so you know I think for me it was drawing that hard line of what a racist idea was, confessing when I expressed that, recognizing that in many ways, even though I was expressing it about a particular racial group, let's say Black women or the Black poor, that I was victimizing them, but I was simultaneously a victim because somebody fed me those ideas so that I can precisely do that. And then, but even more importantly, drawing that hard line about what is an antiracist idea. So the thing about not racism, it doesn't give you anything to strive for. It just gives you something to strive against even though what you're constantly doing is changing the definition, so you can just say whatever you want and then still say that you are not racist, or the least racist person you've ever met. But when you take a position on what an antiracist idea is, it gives you something to strive for to say there's nothing wrong with any of these racial groups and we should not be standardizing any racial group and their culture or their way of knowing and being or looking and then sort of judging another based on that standard that either we believe in a multicultural society or we don't. And when you really believe in a multicultural society you say there's multiple cultures, right? You don't sort of say, OK, you know what, there's a standard language, a standard religion, a standard way of dress even though you're imagining that we live in a multicultural society. And so I think doing that and then finally, and this is the hardest part, is recognizing if the racial groups are equal then that means any sort of racial disparity must be the result of racial discrimination. Because when you think about any disparity, racial disparity there's only two causes. Either it's because there's a particular racial group that's inferior or superior, or racial discrimination. Those are the only two causes for any disparity. So once you take the antiracist position of equality there's only one sort of explanation left for any disparity and that's racial discrimination.

DANIELLE WOOD:
This is great timing, and it starts to address some of the questions we're getting. Are you open to giving us some preview of your next book from the point of view of, I think on one hand, Stamped from the Beginning is a powerful critical analysis and your next book has a proscriptive title. How To Be An Antiracist.

IBRAM KENDI:
Yes.

DANIELLE WOOD:
What can you share?

IBRAM KENDI:
So I should say that I think Stamped from the Beginning and really the history of antiracist ideas that I also share in the text caused many people to come to me and say they wanted to know and understand more about the complexities of antiracism. And so that's really what sort of drove me to write
this book. And essentially what I do is I turn the critical lens away from all of these historical figures and I turn it onto myself. And so it's really an intellectual critical history of my own consumption of racist ideas and sort of how I was able to move forward towards a more antiracist perspective. At the same time, I sort of show the steps that I took or that you could take in that process. So it's part sort of memoir, part sort of prescriptive, which makes it a very difficult book to write, which is why I'm sort of struggling these days. It's not a straight narrative history like Stamped from the Beginning is, but I thought that if I can turn that critical lens on myself and I think if people could read, and for those of you who have read Stamped you know how I can sort of get. If I could turn that on myself and I can say that I was subjected to these ideas, if I could be critical of myself then somebody who's reading it, why can't they be critical of themselves? And so to me, that's one of the non-scholarly missions of the text, you know, allow people to open themselves up to the ideas that they have consumed and become critical of them.

DANIELLE WOOD:
Thank you, thank you for taking that courageous step. I know on one hand it's maybe safer to stay within the traditions and the techniques of academia so thank you for sharing from your heart.

IBRAM KENDI:
Yeah, it's quite shocking some of the things that I've done and said as you'll see.

DANIELLE WOOD:
I look forward to it.

IBRAM KENDI:
Oh, man.

DANIELLE WOOD:
Let's keep expanding, let me share it. I think I mentioned to you that here at MIT we are reflecting on some of our institution's history. I think you're following, I know, some of the work done by Professor Craig Steven Wilder and the other scholars who helped to identify the sort of archival evidence that the founder of MIT owned slaves and so we thought of him as a Northern industrialist who was perhaps far from slavery, but in fact he was also a Virginia slave holder, and of course the book by Craig Steven Wilder, Ebony and Ivory, which I also recommend. Next time I'll bring that one, too. It shows of course that there's no separation between the Northern industrial kind of academic community from the Southern slave community. The two worked closely together, were economically deeply linked. And so as we as a community are having a very vocal and public discussion on this, can you give a reflection on how your work can inform us or how you see connections between the process we'll go through as a community to both heal and also take activist steps in this experience.

IBRAM KENDI:
So I think one of the principle messages of Stamped from the Beginning is the way in which institutions and communities and neighborhoods need to go beyond sort of having conversations about these issues and really need to go about changing policies. Changing policies that actually can then change the racial makeup of an institution or the literary makeup of an institution. And so you know, I would sort of suggest or say that I hope that that is going to be part of, from what I've heard it is this part of sort of discussion that it's not really just talking about the past, but recognizing that there's a current present moment in which that past directly connects to in which that past of course is rooted in racist policies that the founder sort of benefited from financially, but then the question becomes, is MIT still sort of replicating racist policies that particular groups of people are benefiting from? Like, that's the direct
connection. And so it’s not enough to just identify that past policy or series of policies, it’s also incumbent upon institutions to recognize their currents, say, and to not believe they’re in a post-racial sort of community. I am of course a huge fan of Craig’s work and you know, I’m so glad that he has sort of urged through his scholarship these conversations to be had. We’re actually beginning to have one at AU, American University as well. And I think these conversations which hopefully lead to policy changes can be quite fruitful.

**DANIELLE WOOD:**

So that's a great introduction. Can you also please share, we've had some questions about some of your other future research direction. Can you please explain the newly founded Antiracist Research and Policy Center, the model that you'll use and the way you're really putting this into practice not just through historical scholarship but through activism.

**IBRAM KENDI:**

Sure, so I think the Antiracist Research and Policy Center which we founded at AU, but really is in year zero we’re calling it, first and foremost is based on an antiracist idea of the equality of racial groups. And so therefore living in a society, in a world where disparities are pervasive, that means that those racial disparities must be coming out of some sort of racist policy that either we can see or can't see, and so what we've done at the Center is we've organized into these six areas. Education, environment, economy, justice, politics, and health and what we are seeking to do right now is actually raise money to build these fellowship programs in each of these six areas. And each of these six areas or these six fellowship programs will bring to AU a team in each of these six areas of scholars, of policy experts, of journalists, and of advocates or activists. And what these teams of people will do is everything from identifying a critical racial inequity to investigating the discriminatory policies behind that racial inequity, to innovating policy correctives that could then reduce or even eliminate that racial inequity to disseminating those policy innovations as well as the research that they're based on all leading to campaigns of change that would literally seek to get that policy instituted somewhere, somehow. And so that's what we're seeking to do, to use research to create racial change and to use teams of people who have been very critical in the process of racial change to sort of come together ‘cause many of these people operate sort of as individuals. And so that's what we're seeking to do and I know it's quite ambitious, but I mean it was ambitious to create the computer, right? So you know, without ambition we can't, of course, make any change or innovation.

**DANIELLE WOOD:**

You mentioned four kinds of thinkers. I was just wondering, I didn't hear anything about engineers or scientists or inventors.

**IBRAM KENDI:**

What about scholars, you know? That's scholars.

**DANIELLE WOOD:**

Can we get on the list?

**IBRAM KENDI:**

Of course.

**DANIELLE WOOD:**

Yeah, I need to say that I've also recently founded the Space Enabled research group and I just see a lot of parallels. Both of us are asking, how can we find examples of innovation both in policy and
technology in a local context, and then from there see how it might scale or spread to other contexts through local leaders who believe in these visions. And then we ask, how do we use the design process, which as you just described, to really ask what can we change from the point of view of the local community in partnership with these researchers that we're bringing together. So I think that's very powerful. I'm rich in questions here, and so I'm gonna try to organize.

**IBRAM KENDI:**

I'll be more concise with my answers.

**DANIELLE WOOD:**

As I continue I wanted to ask, we've been scaling up, we kind of talked about your personal journey and that's coming in the next book. We talked about MIT's institutional journey and also the work you're doing at AU. Zoom out to the national level for me for a moment. Reflect on the timing of how the book has come out now and how you see it informing our national dialogue.

**IBRAM KENDI:**

Sure, so I think one of the central themes of the text challenges this prominent American historical narrative of singular racial progress. And what I mean by that is, we've been taught this history that we constantly have sort of been taking steps forward but then we occasionally take a step back. Anybody heard that during Black History Month? Over and over again, right? And what that means is that we believe that there's this sort of singular historical force that constantly gets better, particularly as it relates to race. What I find and what I wrote about in Stamped from the Beginning is that there is that force of racial progress that we have long embraced and touted, but there's also a second force that we haven't been willing to acknowledge. And that second force is racist progress. And so I sort of show how, not only have we over the course of American history broken down barriers or even debunked and eliminated racist ideas, but what's happened is when those barriers, the people who benefited from those barriers, they didn't just sort of go fly to their golf courses in Palm Beach Country. Does anybody what I'm talking about? They actually remained and tried to figure out new and more sophisticated ways to basically exclude or disenfranchise or discriminate against groups of people. And the same thing with racist ideas. That racist ideas have become more sophisticated over time just like the policies have at the same time that we've made progress. So I call this the dueling history. Dueling racial history. This duel between this racist and this antiracist force both progressing over time and so many commentators made the case that Barack Obama was a personification of racial progress and he largely billed himself as such in his sort of political brand and so then they were like, how could a Donald Trump sort of follow this sort of embodiment of racial progress? Well typically racist progress has followed racial progress. And so if Obama is a representation of racial progress, then Donald Trump is a representation of racist progress and we see the way in which these two forms are dueling, sort of, currently in our society, which of course racist progress having the upper hand of power. And so that was, of course, very difficult for me to sort of conceptualize, but I think it resolves many of the tensions that particularly have been happening between young and older activists in which older people have been saying, oh, we've made a ton of progress. Young people who just came from being patted down by a police officer are like, I don't see that progress. And so both trying to make the case, OK, who was right? Well actually they're both right. And I try to show that in the text.

**DANIELLE WOOD:**

Wow, yeah, that's good. It's intense and good, because you said it very analytically but there's also so much feeling there that we cannot rest on the progress that's been made.

**IBRAM KENDI:**
DANIELLE WOOD:
Because there's an ongoing drama and battle that is continuing. And so it strikes the community here because the Media Lab is a place of optimism where we try to always be working on a project or a program that's going to lead to some next creation of something useful and one colleague here has asked the question, if we have a good idea and we think we're going to go out and address, for example, a structural inequity or we wanna partner with a community, how do we avoid falling into assimilationist thought when through our best intentions we're trying to be innovative and creative, but our tradition of thinking is really assimilationist. What can we do to actively try to overcome that?

IBRAM KENDI:
So let me give you an example of a distinction between an assimilationist sort of community project and an antiracist community project.

DANIELLE WOOD:
I think we need that. Who here thinks we might need that? Thank you guys, thank you.

IBRAM KENDI:
So when you have an assimilationist perspective, typically you feel that the problem is both people and policy. So you feel that yes, there's racial discrimination, but it's also the case that, let's say, Black people are behaviorally deficient. And so what the Black community needs, not Black individuals, but what the community needs are, let's say, mentoring programs or behavioral upliftment programs that will actually get at the people and sort of renovate their behaviors. That is on the basis that the community, this group sort of needs their behavior to be renovated by a series of one-on-one mentorships, by educational programs, by workshops. Anybody know what I'm talking about? That is essentially and historically an assimilationist project. Now, what antiracists would say is, there's nothing wrong with the people. All they need is opportunity. And so what an assimilationist community project would do is OK, let's figure out a way to change systemic policies in that community that is holding people back. To give an example, why is it there's so many Black people unemployed in this neighborhood? What an assimilationist would say is they don't wanna work, they're not qualified. There's something wrong with the people. What an antiracist would say is, there must be some sort of job discrimination policies sort of operating in this community that we may or may not know. And so it's our job to work with local partners to uncover and eliminate those policies and then once the people have access to those job opportunities some will take it and some won't, just like in the White community some take advantage of opportunities and some don't. And so I think that's a really, you know, and so it's not, you can work in the community, but you have to be clear about, am I trying at better behavior or am I trying to better policy? Another aspect of assimilationist thinking is of course paternalism. That the community doesn't really know sort of how to help itself. So it's my job to go into the community and help it and to tell it what it needs, say to it what it needs to do. That is also assimilationist thinking. These people need resources, they need assistance in the sense of holding their bags, not telling them where to go. And so I think you have to really go into these communities not as a, quote, dictator, but as a servant.

DANIELLE WOOD:
That's really refreshing. It's one thing that even if we start off with that intention it's easy to fall into the assimilationist mindset. So it's a practice you must kind of convey through our activities, through our students, through our classes.

IBRAM KENDI:
And can I say one more thing quickly? I think what assimilationist thought also causes us to do is to say if there is a failure it's not because of our strategy, it's because of the people. In other words, I open up all these things for these people and they didn't take advantage of it. What is wrong with them? As opposed to, maybe you did not open things up for these people 'cause they feel, you know, and so that's another reason why assimilationist strategy is so popular within the activist community. Because the activist never has to look in the mirror of their own strategies.

DANIELLE WOOD:
I'm seeing a question coming in through Twitter, and since we are here at MIT, they were asking, did you have a chance to reflect on the role of technology in particular as a tool or an agent of racist thought? If not, we'll take that as an action for further activities among our community.

IBRAM KENDI:
I think I probably should have done more of it.

DANIELLE WOOD:
I see.

IBRAM KENDI:
But I think one example that I'll give from the book is when the Associated Press was founded before the Civil War. And for those of you who know, the Associated Press, particularly at the time, it's grown since then, but at the time of its founding it would sort of send these wire stories that would be very, very concise. And so of course they developed the technology, of course, to be able to sort of do that and then allow multiple media organizations around the country to use the dispatches of the AP through their new technology. In making complex stories quite concise it opened the door for racist ideas that essentially make complex human problems quite simple. And so basically these writers had to lean on racist ideas in order to basically sort of condense their stories and make them into a deliverable product that could be easily consumed.

DANIELLE WOOD:
Can we give examples of that today? Anyone seen short, quick news items that they receive on their phone and are easily consumed?

IBRAM KENDI:
Precisely.

DANIELLE WOOD:
Well that's really helpful. And I want to just be able to kind of reemphasize some of the things we've been discussing with one of these closing questions. The question's asking, do we still see some of these kinds of racist ideas that are floating around and have an active life, and I want to ask, can you give some examples either of ideas that you've seen literally throughout the 400-year history that you've studied or perhaps some new ones that are not necessarily throughout the book, but you're seeing emerging today. What are some of the contemporary racist ideas? I feel like there's many that I read where as I was reading I thought, I see that one, I see that one, that they haven't changed. Issues around, for example, interracial marriage. The question of do White women prefer a certain race and do Black women prefer a certain race? These things are still areas of struggle for us. But what would you reflect on as some of the ideas that continue to have a strong life and that we still must fight against?

IBRAM KENDI:
So I think that probably the most dangerous racist idea in America today is the idea of the dangerous Black neighborhood with dangerous people. And I think we see the ways in which police officers who’ve quote, go into these communities and police with fear and police the bodies with fear and then justify the killings of those bodies through fear, we see the way that operates in Black communities in which they shoot first and ask questions later. While in other communities they can have a standoff with somebody shooting at them for two days. Anybody saw that story recently? You know, and that’s fine, right? But they can’t wait two minutes to diffuse a situation with this Black body. I think that that idea, to be concise, largely stems from this idea that Black neighborhoods are in fact more dangerous ‘cause there’s higher levels of violent crime. And so if you read the arguments that’s the case that is made. That’s what police officers, and that’s what people in general have been led to believe. They believe that the areas that are Black in this region are the most dangerous. The problem with that idea, and the reason why that idea is false, because every racist idea, I may not say every, most racist ideas people use science and data to prove it. And so with that one they say, yeah, Black people are more dangerous. Their communities are more dangerous, they’re more violent because look at the violent crime statistics. The problem with that is when you connect Black people with violence what you’re saying is that no matter the Black community they’re gonna have the same levels of violence. Everybody understand, so when you make a connection that Black people are causing the violence, it’s a dangerous Black neighborhood what you’re ultimately going to have to say is that no matter the Black community it’s going to have the same level of violence because it has Black people. The problem is that’s not the case. There are differing levels of violence in differing Black communities. Typically Black communities with higher levels of poverty and unemployment have higher levels of violent crime than Black communities with lower levels of poverty and unemployment, and it’s the same thing across every racial group. Within White communities, Asian communities, Native, all of these communities you have higher levels of unemployment and poverty you’re gonna have higher levels of violent crime. So what does that mean? That means that instead of police officers and us imagining this existence of a dangerous Black neighborhood we should be conceiving of it, if we want to speak from the data, as a dangerous unemployed neighborhood. As a dangerous impoverished neighborhood. But then that changes the calculation of how to solve the problem because you’re not gonna solve the problem by putting more police on the streets, by being, quote, tougher on crime. You solve the problem through what, jobs. Through income. But then that then puts politicians who have that power in a different sort of political space and they would rather make us believe that those people are the problem and I'm solve it by putting more cops on the street. And if the cops don't solve the problem I'm gonna say it's because of those dangerous people. And so it sort of recycles this and allows them to continue to attract White voters in particular for mass deporting and mass incarceration policies based on this idea that these people are so dangerous and we have to get rid of them. All the while they’re cutting resources for those very White people's schools and other things that actually benefit them and forwarding it to the people who are their benefactors. So this is, you know, high level sort of politics in which people are being manipulated by those ideas and I could sort of speak about others. One quick idea that I think is new, while simultaneously being old, is the idea of the nation being post-racial.

DANIELLE WOOD:
Thank you, please address that, yeah.

IBRAM KENDI:
And I argue in the book that this is quite possibly the most sophisticated racist idea ever created. And the reason why it's so sophisticated is because unlike other racist ideas that explain exactly how and why Black people are inferior, what post-racial thought does is it creates this environment in which people create those ideas for themselves. In other words, what it does to people, it says, racial discrimination doesn't exist. And then those people live in a society with racial disparities all around them. And so in
order to explain why those disparities exist all around them the individual creates racist ideas to explain those very disparities.

DANIELLE WOOD:
And those are both the people experiencing racist ideas as well as those who are producers imposing them on others.

IBRAM KENDI:
Precisely, and so I see this Black poverty and I'm like, it can't be racial discrimination 'cause we're in a post-racial society so it must be because those Black people are lazy. OK, you've proven that Black people are not lazy. It must be because they have broken families. OK, we've proven that one good parent is better than two bad ones. OK, it must be something else. And so then I keep thinking of a way, 'cause it can't be racial discrimination because they have been convinced and so they become the progenitor of racist. Everyday people become the progenitor and the circulator of racist ideas and that's basically the world we live in. I've engaged with people that no matter, every single idea that I can statistically debunk they create a new one to explain that disparity. Or they say, oh, I don't trust that data. Anybody know what I'm talking about?

DANIELLE WOOD:
And thanks so much for highlighting the role of data and science. You've both given us power from the point of view that we can use data to make clear and refined findings. We've also shown the possible pitfalls. And of course this is a community where we value data highly and we try to generate it, we try to visualize it, we try to play with it, but you're giving us a key caution to keep in mind that if we think we find data that seems to prove a racist idea, we have good incentive now to go back and check and continue to look for alternative explanations.

IBRAM KENDI:
And I think where we make mistakes is when we make intellectual leaps based on data. So we make interpretations. To give an example, there has been over the last 40 years a decline in a number of homicides that have ended in arrests. It's called clearance rates. And so what police officers have stated and the law enforcement community has stated that the reason for that decline in clearance rates, it went from I think 90% in the 1960s to now 2/3, is because of a no snitch Black culture. That Black people are just not, you know, there's this no snitch culture. But then when you actually look at the actual data on snitching it actually shows that Black people are just as likely to snitch as other racial groups. And if anything, White people are least likely to snitch. And so it completely debunks. And so you see that we make all of these intellectual leaps which to me show that people are searching for ways to prove the ideas that they have as opposed to allowing data to guide the creation of ideas.

DANIELLE WOOD:
Let's take one minute and just give a final word. So we're at the end of our time, but you're on fire now so I hate to interrupt. But we thank you so much for being here and we thank you for this exploration, both historically and personally as well as institutionally. And we plan that this is not the end of the conversation. Please consider your final closing word to the audience.

IBRAM KENDI:
Sure, so I think one primary idea that I also wanted to connote and demonstrate in the text is really the central thesis of the text which I came to through the research which is that I have been led to believe that racist ideas were leading to racist policies. In other words, those who had instituted, those powerful people who had instituted racist policies from enslaving policies to mass incarcerating policies
did it because of their racist ideas. And I also had been led to believe, as I'm sure many of you have, that those racist ideas came out of ignorance and hate. In other words, they were expressing those racist ideas because they just did not know or because they somehow had this inborn hate of Black people and that--

**DANIELLE WOOD:**
Maybe they hadn't met enough nice Black people yet, right?

**IBRAM KENDI:**
Exactly, and if they just only were around more uplifting Black people then they would be OK. And so really that's the causal relationship we have long been taught that ignorance and hate leads to racist ideas, and racist ideas lead to racist policies. And that's why we've been so focused on education and even coming out of the church, love because we thought that really the cradle is ignorance and hate. So I investigate that in Stamped from the Beginning. I distinguish between the producers of racist ideas and the consumers. I focus on the people making the political speeches as opposed to the people listening to them. The people writing the bestselling novels. The major theologians, the filmmakers, the scholars, not the people consuming these. And I ask the question, why were they producing these ideas, many of which have stood the test of time and I found that typically they were seeking to justify and substantiate existing racial disparities and existing racist policies that oftentimes benefited them. In other words, I found that people were saying that slavery is good for Black people not because they believed it, but because abolitionists and slaves themselves were resisting it and they wanted to maintain those policies that allowed them to become rich. And so I actually found the inverse, that racist policies were leading to racist ideas. That racist ideas and their consumption were leading to ignorance and hate. And that the cradle of this all was unfortunately economic, political, and cultural self-interest. That really that was driving the creation of these policies and the need to defend these policies were leading to the creation of these ideas and that people simply have been trafficking in these ideas because the policies benefited them. You know, these policies, you know, I'm going to use these ideas to manipulate people so I can maintain these policies that benefit me, that allow me to stay in office, that allow my organization to continue to make money, that allow me to ascend in my profession. And that's the unfortunate story that I told, but I think it also gives us a sense of the solution. It also gives us a reason why those long-standing efforts at trying to educate away the producers of racist ideas have failed because they weren't producing those ideas out of ignorance. They were producing them out of self-interest. And so it allows us to realize that the central force, I would argue, in the racial struggle, is a power struggle. That really we're engaged and we've been engaged historically in a power struggle over policies, over resources, and this power struggle of course has been historically between racists and antiracists.

**DANIELLE WOOD:**
And so we will join you because you want to add to the antiracist side of the team and work with you to think about what will be the antiracist policies of the future. So with that I want to say thank you and thank you so much to the audience for joining us.