

# An Essential Reading Guide For Fighting Racism

On Monday, May 25, two moments of antiblack racism — [the death of George Floyd in police custody in Minneapolis](#) and [Amy Cooper's call to 911](#) with the [false report](#) that "an African American man is threatening my life" — [spurred protests](#) and heated dialogue about white supremacy and white Americans' responsibility in dismantling it. For those who want to take anti-racist action but don't know where to begin, below is a list of books about racism — anti-blackness in particular — and white privilege.

## **[How to Be an Antiracist](#) by Ibram X. Kendi**

The title says it all: Historian Ibram Kendi reorients the discussion of racism to focus on the act of fighting against it; it's not enough to be a passive opponent. Weaving in accounts from his own life, Kendi expounds the consequences of racism and white supremacy in our public and private spheres, exploring the ways racism manifests within and across demographics, and shows the reader what antiracism looks like and can achieve. In praise for the book, author Ijeoma Oluo describes Kendi's work as "vital," adding, "As a society, we need to start treating antiracism as action, not emotion — and Kendi is helping us do that."

## **[Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America](#) by Ibram X. Kendi**

If you want to dive deeper with Kendi, there's his National Book Award-winning *Stamped From the Beginning*, which scrutinizes the history of anti-black racist thought in America from its very beginning to now. By showing how deeply entrenched racist ideas have been — and still are — in America, and thus exposing clearly and discrediting these ideas, Kendi has created not only a great work of scholarship but a much-needed tool.

For younger readers, check out [Stamped: Racism, Antiracism, and You](#) — Kendi's adaptation of both *Stamped* and *How to Be an Antiracist*, co-written with Jason Reynolds.

## **[White Rage: The Unspoken Truth of Our Racial Divide](#) by Carol Anderson**

In the aftermath of the Ferguson riots, Anderson wrote [an op-ed in \*The Washington Post\*](#) arguing the nation's attention should be on the rage that had sparked them — but, she wrote, it wasn't black rage. In her 2016 book, Anderson continues her piercing analysis of white rage, and the ways in which it has fueled, and continues to fuel, political decisions which push back against the advancement of black Americans.

## **[Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption](#) by Bryan Stevenson**

When young public interest lawyer Bryan Stevenson opened the Equal Justice Initiative in 1989 — a nonprofit offering legal representation to people who've suffered illegal conviction or excessive punishment — one of his first clients was Walter McMillian, who was sitting on death row for the murder (of a white woman) that he didn't commit. *Just Mercy* recounts Stevenson's experience working to overturn McMillian's wrongful conviction, and illuminates the institutional racism and corruption that allowed for it. (A film based on the novel [was released in 2019](#).)

## **[American Lynching](#) by Ashraf H.A. Rushdy**

In *American Lynching*, Rushdy gives a comprehensive, eloquently interpreted history of lynching as it has evolved and been redefined over the course of three centuries in American history.

[In a 2017 email interview with BuzzFeed News](#), St. Johns University professor of history Nathan Connolly wrote, "This book offers a critical discussion of the distinctiveness of mob violence in the United States by linking it to the traditions of white popular sovereignty. Historically, Rushdy points out, white people, not the state, have been understood as the highest source of political authority in America. Lynching represented a violent articulation of 'We the People.' And the country's own struggles to realize democracy in the nineteenth and twentieth century can be understood, in part, as a struggle to make the rule of law either sovereign over or in line with perceived white interests."

## **[Biased: Uncovering the Hidden Prejudice That Shapes What We See, Think, and Do](#) by Jennifer L. Eberhardt**

Professor of psychology at Stanford Jennifer Eberhardt exposes the hidden racial biases that directly affect our lives — biases built into, among others, political, educational, medical, justice, and financial systems in the US. It's a scientific, analytical, and personal examination of these widespread prejudices, as well as an empowering and even hopeful guide for ways to help dismantle them. In praise for the book, Bryan Stevenson said *Biased* "presents the science of bias with rare insight and accessibility, but it is also a work with the power and craft to make us see why overcoming racial bias is so critical."

## **[White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk about Racism](#) by Robin DiAngelo**

Anti-racist educator DiAngelo explores the defensive and aggressive reactions white people have when they're confronted with the reality of racial inequality and the ways they enable it. DiAngelo breaks down the idea of white fragility, identifying its related emotions (anger, fear,

guilt) and its counterproductive behaviors (argumentation, silence), explaining how these behaviors allow for white supremacy, and outlining ways to more earnestly and constructively engage in antiracist work. Poet and playwright Claudia Rankine describes it as "a necessary book for all people invested in societal change through productive social and intimate relationships."

### ***Fatal Invention: How Science, Politics, and Big Business Re-Create Race in the Twenty-First Century* by Dorothy Roberts**

Scholar and social justice advocate Dorothy Roberts expounds the ways in which myths about biological concepts of race have had recent revivals with dangerous, and even fatal, repercussions. She explores new areas of medicine and science such as race-specific drugs, genetic testing, and DNA databases, and disproves their race-based conclusions, revealing instead how they become justification for propagating systemic inequality and undermining nonwhite — and especially black — populations.

### ***The Fire This Time: A New Generation Speaks About Race*, edited by Jesmyn Ward**

Edited by National Book Award winner Jesmyn Ward, *The Fire This Time* is a collection of pieces by various authors on race in America, inspired by James Baldwin's 1963 book *The Fire Next Time*. Where were we then, where are we now, and where are we headed? Through its stunning essays and poems, this collection masterfully explores those questions and more.

### ***The Fire Next Time* by James Baldwin**

Don't miss the original. *The Fire Next Time* was a national bestseller when it published in 1963 — a revolutionary call to arms for the civil rights movement. In two essays, Baldwin draws from his early life in Harlem and expands from there to illustrate the breadth of American racism and injustice, and unflinchingly describes its harrowing consequences. In a [2015 list of his favorite books](#), Ta-Nehisi Coates wrote, "Basically the finest essay I've ever read. [...] Baldwin refused to hold anyone's hand. He was both direct and beautiful all at once. He did not seem to write to convince you. He wrote beyond you."

### ***So You Want to Talk About Race* by Ijeoma Oluo**

Oluo's New York Times best-selling debut is a frank, illuminating, and accessible guide to navigating thorny but vital conversations about race and racism — covering topics like intersectionality, representation, privilege, and mass incarceration. In praise for *So You Want to Talk About Race*, author Robin DiAngelo called Oluo "the smartest, most courageous and electrifying young writer on race relations today — the voice of our times. Let her be your guidepost."

## ***White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism* by Kevin Kruse**

In *White Flight*, Harvard professor of history Kevin Kruse looks at the transition of Atlanta during and following the civil rights era — shifting from a site of rare racial harmony to one which whites rapidly fled. Reassessing the assumptions around this "white flight" to suburbs, Kruse digs deep into the meaning of white resistance, demonstrating that it's one aspect of a conservatism that transformed during struggles over segregation and gave birth to causes like tuition vouchers and privatization of public services. In his review, NYU professor Thomas Sugrue wrote, "This important book has national implications for our thinking about the links between race, suburbanization, and the rise of the New Right."

## ***This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, edited by Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa**

Originally published in 1981, *This Bridge Called My Back* was groundbreaking for its bringing together writings by women of color from diverse backgrounds in one vital collection. In essays, poetry, interviews, and criticism, contributors (including Audre Lorde, Toni Cade Bambara, Aurora Levins Morales) described the ways in which non-white women are oppressed because of their race, ethnicity, sexuality, and class, spurring the necessary shift in feminism toward intersectionality.

[In her review of the third edition](#), published in 2002, Angela Davis writes, "*This Bridge Called My Back* ... dispels all doubt about the power of a single text to radically transform the terrain of our theory and practice. [...] It has offered us strategies for transformative political practice that are as valid today as they were two decades ago."

## ***The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration* by Isabel Wilkerson**

From 1915 to 1970, nearly six million black citizens fled the South for northern and western cities like Chicago, New York, Philadelphia, and Los Angeles. Pulitzer Prize-winning Wilkerson does a deep dive into this migration through the lens of three individuals who made the move, weaving in historical analysis, firsthand reporting, and original demographic data. Former BuzzFeed News employee Saeed Jones named it as [one of the best books of the decade](#), saying Wilkerson "zooms out to contextualize their stories within the broader swell of history. It's also beautifully written with an eye for detail any poet can appreciate."

## ***Me and White Supremacy: Combat Racism, Change the World, and Become a Good Ancestor* by Layla F. Saad**

In 2018, educator and activist Saad began an Instagram challenge asking white people to really confront their racist behaviors and ideas through a 28-day exercise guided by a free workbook. Nearly 100,000 people downloaded the workbook as the #meandwhitesupremacy challenge went viral. This book is an expansion on the original workbook, adding cultural insight and historical context. In praise for the book, scholar and activist Rachel Cargle says, "Layla not only engages readers effectively — she hands them the tools they need to change themselves so that they can better the lives of millions of people worldwide."

## **[Racism Without Racists](#) by Eduardo Bonilla-Silva**

In *Racism Without Racists*, political sociologist Bonilla-Silva illuminates the insidious form of racism that exists among those who insist they don't see race at all. By poking holes in deracialized justifications for things like nonwhite communities' higher rate of imprisonment and poverty and lower levels of education and health care coverage, Bonilla-Silva exposes the weakness of any claims that America is "post-racial." Historian Robin Kelley [praises the book](#) for its ability to "make many readers uncomfortable, as it should," adding, "With care and a wicked sense of humor, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva explores the kind of subtle, everyday racism that some of 'our best friends' unconsciously perpetuate."

## **[The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit From Identity Politics](#) by George Lipsitz**

In *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness*, black studies scholar Lipsitz offers an exhaustive analysis of the many ways in which whiteness is centered and rewarded in housing, education, health care, employment, and culture, as well as an examination of white privilege as it's long been defined and critiqued in radical black culture.

[In a 2017 email interview with BuzzFeed News](#), cultural critic [Irene Nexica](#) wrote, "Lipsitz deftly weaves a diverse set of knowledge into social histories of popular culture that simultaneously shapes and is shaped by society with analyses that are both accessible to a general reader and containing sharp cultural critique. *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness* looks at whiteness in America from many angles, including OJ Simpson ('White Fear: O.J. Simpson and the Greatest Story Ever Sold'), Stephen King's *Lean on Me* (where Lipsitz complicates things by describing how 'not all white supremacists are white'), and the ways that different nonwhite communities are impacted by whiteness."

## **[Citizen: An American Lyric](#) by Claudia Rankine**

This book-length poetic essay might be the most powerful piece of writing of the last 10 years. Maybe more. It's almost downplaying it to call it "relevant" or "timely," because part of Rankine's point is that much of what she talks about with regards to race and racism — and the

violence against black people in this country — has been going on for centuries and has not changed significantly in that time. And the toll that it takes on black people is immeasurable.

### ***Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* by Patricia Hill Collins**

In *Black Feminist Thought*, renowned sociology scholar Collins created an undeniable foundational text in black feminism, as well as a framework for reading and understanding black feminist thinkers before her, including Angela Davis, bell hooks, and Audre Lorde. In a 2013 list of must-reads, [Ashley Ford called it](#), "The holy grail of black feminist theory and history. You need this one now. As in, buy it before anything else."

### ***When Affirmative Action Was White: An Untold History of Racial Inequality in Twentieth-Century America* by Ira Katznelson**

Political scientist and Columbia professor Ira Katznelson's book is a shrewd and revelatory examination of the civil rights programs that came out throughout the 1930s and 1940s, exposing the deep discriminations that allowed the economic gap between blacks and whites to continue to widen after the war. Notable scholar and cultural critic Henry Louis Gates, Jr., praises it as an "explosive analysis [which provides us with a new and painful understanding of how politics and race intersect.]"

### ***Dog Whistle Politics: How Coded Racial Appeals Have Reinvented Racism and Wrecked the Middle Class* by Ian Haney López**

López has written extensively on the evolution of racism in the US since the 1960s, and his latest book hones in on the links between racism and the growing wealth gap. [In a 2017 email interview with BuzzFeed News](#), López said the book explores the ways the right has used white anxiety in the past 50 years "in order to (1) stoke fear and resentment toward people of color, (2) foment hatred toward (liberal) government, and (3) build popular support for politicians beholden to the billionaire class."

### ***Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* by Audre Lorde**

All of Lorde's books are essential reading, but *Sister Outsider* presents 15 beautifully written speeches and essays by the black lesbian feminist poet that will make you rethink everything you thought you knew about feminism, race, sex, ageism, homophobia, and power. It will leave you inspired — and ready to take on the hegemony.

## **[Habits of Whiteness: A Pragmatist Reconstruction](#) by Terrance MacMullan**

MacMullan's book is for white readers who understand whiteness is a problem, but don't know what to do about it. Weaving in the work of thinkers and writers like John Dewey, W.E.B. DuBois, and Gloria Anzaldua, MacMullan urges white Americans — especially those who consider themselves free of prejudice — to recognize the habits that reveal inherited racism, and unlearning them.

[In a 2017 email interview with BuzzFeed News](#), MacMullan reemphasized the need for "white folks to first do the hard work of uprooting habits of white racism and privilege, but then plant the seeds of cultural habits that can be sources of pride for white people that are free of the violence and exclusion of the past." Otherwise, he warned, "we will continue to see young white people fall for the lie of white power."

## **[The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness](#) by Michelle Alexander**

Alexander's best-selling book dismantles the notion of color-blindness through the lens of the criminal justice system. By targeting black communities through programs like the War on Drugs, stop and frisk, and "broken windows" policing, Alexander argues, the government has enacted a new type of racial control — mass incarceration. Cornel West called it an "instant classic" and "a grand wake-up call in the midst of a long slumber of indifference to the poor and vulnerable."

## **[Between the World and Me](#) by Ta-Nehisi Coates**

Ta-Nehisi Coates' massive 2015 hit is a heartfelt meditation on the realities of life in the US as a black man, and a damning appraisal of the systems and beliefs that make that reality a dangerous one. Written as a letter to his son, it sees Coates touch on the lived experiences that formed his ideology, weaving in the reporting and analysis that have made him one of the leading voices on race today; Toni Morrison called the book "required reading."

## **[Raising White Kids: Bringing Up Children in a Racially Unjust America](#) by Jennifer Harvey**

Religious scholar and ordained minister Jennifer Harvey lays out accessible and age-appropriate methods for teaching white children about racism, and tools for answering their questions when they encounter it. Vitally, she also explains the importance of helping them understand their identity as a white person in the US, and the ways in which they can use their privilege to bring about change. It's necessary reading for parents and caregivers.

## *Eloquent Rage: A Black Feminist Discovers Her Superpower* by **Brittney Cooper**

Cooper, a professor of Women's and Gender Studies and Africana Studies at Rutgers University, draws from her own experience in this hybrid memoir/cultural criticism, rejecting the stereotype of black women's anger as something irrational and easily dismissed, and instead opening up that anger to show its power. In praise for *Eloquent Rage*, Black Lives Matter co-founder Alicia Garza said, "Cooper gives us the uncensored truth about how America has become what it is today, and reminds us in no uncertain terms that Black people, and particularly Black women, have the brilliance, foresight, and vision to bring a different America to fruition, should we choose to use our powers for good rather than evil."

## *Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America* by **Melissa V. Harris-Perry**

Author, professor, and TV personality Harris-Perry's 2011 book is a necessary treatise about the prejudices black women encounter in their daily lives, and how the struggle for self-determination is especially difficult in light of persistently negative imagery and stereotypes about gender and race. Harris-Perry is deliberately not prescriptive; as she writes, "This is less a book about what black women do to become first-class American citizens than one about how they feel while they are in that struggle."