

ANTI-BLACKNESS/ COLORISM

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“The reason people think it’s important to be white is that they think it’s important not to be black.”

— James Baldwin

Defining Anti-Blackness and Anti-Black Racism

Anti-Blackness is defined as the beliefs, attitudes, actions, practices, and behaviors of individuals and institutions that devalue, minimize, and marginalize the full participation of Black people² —visibly (or perceived to be) of African descent. It is the systematic denial of Black humanity and dignity, which makes Black people effectively ineligible for full citizenship. The Anti-Blackness paradigm positions Blackness as inherently problematic, rather than recognizing the long, rich, and diverse history of Black people throughout the African diaspora, and acknowledging that Black communities across the United States (and the world) have been severely disadvantaged as a result of historical and contemporary systemic racism.

Anti-Blackness is also closely related to anti-darkness/colorism, as it amplifies and prioritizes proximity to whiteness. Colorism, the term used to describe the unequal treatment of and discrimination against individuals based on their skin tone, is rooted in and perpetuates white supremacy and racism by privileging and upholding Eurocentric beauty standards.³ Eurocentric physical features (e.g., lighter skin, narrower nose, straighter hair) are afforded greater value and considered more desirable than Afrocentric physical features (e.g., darker skin, broader nose, more coarse hair). Thus, the closer to whiteness (and further away from Blackness) individuals are, the more privilege and power they are assigned in society, and in essence, the more power they have.

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²Black people refers to descendants of people from the African diaspora, including but not limited to African Americans.

³Antoinette M. Landor and Sharde McNeil, “Skin Tone Trauma: Historical and Contemporary Influences on the Health and Interpersonal Outcomes of African Americans,” *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 14, no. 5 (September 2019): 797-815, <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1745691619851781>; Angela R. Dixon and Edward E. Telles, “Skin Color and Colorism: Global Research, Concepts, and Measurement,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 43 (July 2017): 405-424, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-soc-060116-053315>.

Many notable scholars in this area, including W.E.B. Du Bois, Angela Davis, Ibram X. Kendi, and Michael J. Dumas, have illustrated a complex and disconcerting vision of anti-Blackness and what it has offered white Americans. The policies and practices designed to uphold white supremacy are the same policies and practices that harm Black people and communities. Dumas argues that “the aim of theorizing anti-Blackness is not to offer solutions to racial inequality, but to come to a deeper understanding of the Black condition within a context of utter contempt for and acceptance of violence against the Black.”⁴ Hence, anti-Blackness lives in values and beliefs that can render Black bodies disposable, resulting in, among other things, the over-surveillance, over-policing, and under-protection of Black people in American society. This inability to recognize Black humanity is, in part, what maintains white supremacy.

Anti-Black racism is a specific kind of racial prejudice directed towards Black people, or those perceived to be Black. More than merely a product of a few bad actors or individual prejudice, anti-Black racism is systematic and structural. It systematically marginalizes Black people and communities, and devalues Blackness in all contexts.

Although the past few years have brought about more familiarity with concepts like “racism” and “white privilege,” the concept of “anti-Blackness” is often overlooked. The term “racism,” however, fails to fully capture the experiences of Black people, including but not limited to Black women, men, trans Black people, Black gender non-conforming, non binary, Black youth, Black girls and boys, Black families, Black migrants, Black communities, etc. Thus, we can no longer afford to rely simply on our understanding of “racism” generally, lest we flatten, minimize, and distort the Black experience in America. We must be intentional in our acknowledgement of the specific harm caused by “anti-Black racism.”

Moreover, this concept pushes back against the notion that all racial and ethnic minority groups have similar lived experiences that can be generalized into one category like POC (People/Person of Color) and BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, & People of Color). “Anti-Blackness is without analogue. Hence, “[s]uch comparisons or conflation serve to undermine the specific centrality of anti-Blackness to U.S. society, its institutions, politics, and practices.”⁵

And to be clear, one does not have to be white to contribute to anti-Blackness or adopt anti-Black attitudes. In fact, anti-Black racism is not just about the racial oppression of Black people by whites, but by other racial and ethnic groups as well, all of which have themselves been heavily influenced by white supremacy. Indeed, anti-Blackness and anti-Black racism reside and thrive within institutions and ideologies of white supremacy, whiteness, and fear of Blackness⁶ and have a profound effect on anyone forced to engage with those institutions and ideologies, irrespective of their own racial or ethnic background.

⁴Michael J. Dumas, “Against the Dark: Antiblackness in Education Policy and Discourse,” *Theory into Practice* 55, no. 1 (January 2016): 13, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00405841.2016.1116852>.

⁵Connie Wun, “Against Captivity: Black Girls and School Discipline Policies in the Afterlife of Slavery,” *Educational Policy* 30, no. 1 (November 2016): 171-196, <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0895904815615439>.

⁶Ibram X. Kendi, *How to be an Antiracist* (New York: One World, 2019).

History of Anti-Blackness and Anti-Black Racism

Perhaps more than any other facet of American life, the issue of race—and anti-Black racism specifically—has been the defining characteristic of this country. Indeed, the economic, social, and moral foundation of the United States has been shaped largely by the 400 years of chattel slavery, state-sanctioned terror, legal and de facto segregation, mass incarceration and over-policing, voter disenfranchisement, and ongoing discrimination that continue to dominate both our history and our current reality, all of which is rooted in the notion that to be Black is to be inferior, incapable, unworthy, less than human, and most importantly, deserving of the physical and psychological mistreatment and marginalization to which we have been subjected.

In this sense, anti-Blackness is part of the foundation upon which the United States was built and has been a way of life in this country from its inception, whether it be the wealthy white male power structure bent on taking whatever steps are necessary to maintain its control over Black and brown people and communities, or the poor and middle class white mainstream, which has been convinced that, whatever troubles or obstacles they may be experiencing in their own lives, their ultimate value lies in their whiteness, which will always prevail over Blackness, no matter the circumstances or the context. As many have suggested, the meteoric rise of Donald Trump over the last several years, and the overtly racist undertones of his 2016 presidential campaign, in particular, are directly correlated to the ascendance of our first Black president.⁷ The deep-seated anti-Black and anti-immigrant sentiment among many white Trump supporters, while always percolating below the surface, revealed itself repeatedly in the wake of Barack Obama's election to the presidency—from the racially-charged threats and protests by disgruntled white voters in the days and weeks following the 2008 election,⁸ to the violent 2017 “Unite the Right” rally by white supremacists in Charlottesville, Virginia.⁹

Even among Black and brown people themselves, the claws of anti-Blackness have taken hold, leading many Black people (and communities) to internalize this sense of inferiority and question their own worth, both as individuals and as a collective.¹⁰ As suggested above, the concept of colorism itself arises out of an internal disdain for darker skin tones and a reverence for lighter skin tones, and has been a source of discord and division in the Black community (and across the African diaspora) for generations.

As such, anti-Blackness impacts every aspect of our lives—from education to employment; housing to health care; access to transportation to the administration of our criminal legal system. Longstanding inequities across all of these areas have combined to maintain the status quo over time and make it

⁷Ta-Nehisi Coates, “The First White President: The Foundation of Donald Trump’s Presidency is the Negation of Barack Obama’s Legacy,” *The Atlantic*, October 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/10/the-first-white-president-ta-nehisi-coates/537909/>; see also Jamelle Bouie, “How Trump Happened,” *Slate*, March 13, 2016, http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/cover_story/2016/03/how_donald_trump_happened_racism_against_barack_obama.html.

⁸Larry Keller, “Racist Backlash Greets President Barack Obama,” *Southern Poverty Law Center*, February 26, 2009, <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/intelligence-report/2009/racist-backlash-greets-president-barack-obama>; see also, Jay Reeves, “Obama Election Spurs Race Threats, Crimes,” *NBC News*, November 15, 2008, <https://www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna27738018>.

⁹Joe Heim, “Recounting a Day of Rage, Hate, Violence, and Death,” *The Washington Post*, August 14, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2017/local/charlottesville-timeline/>.

¹⁰Karen D. Pyke, “What is Internalized Racial Oppression and Why Don’t We Study It? Acknowledging Racism’s Hidden Injuries,” *Sociological Perspectives* 53, no. 4 (December 2010): 551–572, <https://doi.org/10.1525/sop.2010.53.4.551.S2CID43997467>.

impossible for Black and brown communities to compete or close the educational or wealth gap.¹¹ And to be clear, these inequities are neither coincidental nor unconnected.

Rather, anti-Blackness, in all its manifestations, has been, and continues to be, an essential part of the concerted effort among the white establishment to entrench its own power. In particular, the anti-Blackness crusade has been used to destroy/devalue the collective identity of Black people; criminalize Black people and communities, thus leading to fewer opportunities, more poverty, more dependence, and less political power; and marginalize Black people and communities, physically and otherwise, to facilitate their exclusion and/or erasure from privileged spaces in our society.

Core Components of Anti-Blackness and Anti-Black Racism

Destruction/Devaluation of Identity

From the beginning, white Americans have sought to justify the enslavement of and discrimination against Black people by arguing that we are less than fully human; that Blackness—in and of itself—is so evil, so frightening, so deficient, so inferior to whiteness in every way, that it warrants, even requires, the systematic oppression of an entire race. After all, how else could one explain away the glaring paradox of the American ideal—life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness—that failed to include the men and women who built this country, and whose uncompensated labor is the ultimate source of white America’s tremendous generational wealth? If white Americans hope to sleep soundly at night, it was/is necessary to perceive Black people as thoughtless, emotionless brutes, unaware of their own inferiority and in need of redemption; or as three-fifths of a person, unworthy of even being counted as fully human; or as violent, uncontrollable, hypersexual monsters incapable of rational thought or complex emotion. So, in the American context, anti-Blackness has been not only a reality, but a requirement, among those seeking to justify their own racist thoughts and behaviors.

With this current of anti-Blackness running through American history, it is no surprise that it has manifested both through the actions of individual, everyday Americans (e.g. Charlottesville, George Zimmerman/Trayvon Martin, and countless instances of white people questioning and/or calling the police on Black people they perceive to be “out of place”), and through official government policies and regulations over time (from the explicit Jim Crow laws that dominated the pre-Civil Rights era, to the less explicit, but perhaps more insidious, practices of law enforcement agencies, education departments, housing authorities, and other government entities that continue today).

Sadly, anti-Blackness also manifests itself in myriad ways among Black people trying to make sense of their own existence. Not surprisingly, for many Black folks, the messages of inferiority, whether explicit or implicit, ultimately have a negative impact on their own self-esteem, as well as their overall perceptions of the value of Black life. Whether it is buying into a standard of beauty that idealizes blonde hair and blue eyes; or doubting one’s ability to achieve academically or professionally; or

¹¹Ta-Nehisi Coates, “The Case for Reparations,” *The Atlantic*, June 2014, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/06/the-case-for-reparations/361631/>.

devaluing the importance of one's own experiences, this kind of internalized oppression has wreaked havoc on the collective psyche of the Black community.

Moreover, this effort to devalue Blackness, combined with other categories of identity, can not only make Blackness invisible or less important, but it can make other parts of our identity invisible as well. For example, when we consider gender as it relates to policy making across all sectors of our society, Black women and other gender dissents often are not fully considered either in policy design or implementation, which means that a 'raceless' component to gender leaves Black women disproportionately negatively impacted by flawed policies and more vulnerable to harm by those policies.

Criminalization

In recent years, the manifestations of anti-Blackness in the context of the criminal legal system have garnered perhaps the most attention among Americans. In the wake of the many high-profile police killings of Black people over the last decade—an all-too familiar list including Eric Garner, Breonna Taylor, Tamir Rice, Philando Castille, George Floyd, and countless others—white America has been forced to confront the disproportionate harm being suffered by Black communities at the hands of law enforcement. This is in addition to the collective realization, among conservatives and liberals alike, that mass incarceration generally is not only cruel, often unnecessary, and extremely expensive, it has also devastated Black and brown communities in particularly tragic and far-reaching ways.

Of course, the seed of anti-Blackness was planted in our criminal legal system from the very start. It is well-documented that, particularly in the South, state legislatures passed a slew of criminal laws in the wake of emancipation—aptly referred to as “black codes”—that were designed specifically to target newly-freed Blacks.¹² The southern white establishment readily took advantage of the gaping loophole in the 13th Amendment that (still) allows for the involuntary servitude of people in prison, and used the penal system to exert physical control over a Black population that they could no longer legally enslave.¹³ It should come as no surprise, then, that anti-Black racism continues to rear its ugly head in the context of the criminal legal system.

As Michelle Alexander so eloquently reminded the public more than a decade ago in her groundbreaking work, *The New Jim Crow*, the devastating collateral consequences that accompany criminalization in this country have crippled Black people and communities over the last several decades. “Once you're labeled a felon, the old forms of discrimination—employment discrimination, housing discrimination, denial of the right to vote, denial of educational opportunity, denial of food stamps and other public benefits, and exclusion from jury service—are suddenly legal.”¹⁴ As such, “we have not ended racial caste in America; we have merely redesigned it.”¹⁵ Indeed, Black people continue to be arrested, prosecuted,

¹²Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow* (New York: The New Press, 2010), 28-29; see also Nadra Kareem Nittle, “How the Black Codes Limited African American Progress After the Civil War,” *History.com*, January 28, 2021, <https://www.history.com/news/black-codes-reconstruction-slavery>.

¹³Douglass A. Blackmon, *Slavery by Another Name: The Re-Enslavement of Black Americans from the Civil War to World War II* (New York: Anchor Books, 2008).

¹⁴Alexander, *The New Jim Crow*, 2.

¹⁵Alexander, *The New Jim Crow*, 2.

and severely sentenced at disproportionate rates in jurisdictions across the country.¹⁶ When it comes to the enforcement of marijuana laws, for instance, Black people are more than three times more likely than whites to be arrested for possession, despite the fact that usage rates among Blacks and whites are nearly identical, and notwithstanding the growing trend toward decriminalization of marijuana across the country.¹⁷ More generally, Black people are arrested at a significantly higher rate than whites across almost all crimes.¹⁸ Further, despite accounting for just 13 percent of the U.S. population, Black people comprise approximately 40 percent of those serving time in jails and prisons nationwide,¹⁹ and nearly 50 percent of those serving life, life without parole, or “virtual life” sentences.²⁰

Health

Historical and contemporary anti-Black racism has negatively contributed to the physical, emotional, psychological health and well-being of Black people. In fact, in recent decades, research has shown how anti-Black racism at individual and institutional levels contributes to poor health outcomes. For example, Black people suffer from disproportionately high rates of morbidity and shorter overall life expectancy compared to other racial and ethnic groups in the United States.²¹ Moreover, the cumulative experiences of anti-Black racism has been linked to chronic stress and weathering, a process in which biological age accelerates faster than one’s chronological age.²² Systemic anti-Black racism within health care settings has also resulted in health disparities in testing, pain treatment and management, and the quality and longevity of patient visits. For instance, research has demonstrated that anti-Black attitudes and practices in medicine betray a significant level of disregard for Black women in particular (e.g., mistreatment during childbirth, delayed prenatal care).²³ And most recently, we have seen the devastating impact of anti-Black structural racism in health care, as Black communities continue to be ravaged by the COVID-19 pandemic. From a disproportionate lack of access to testing and treatment, to the prevalence of pre-existing medical conditions that make the virus more deadly, Black communities have struggled to weather the storm. And unfortunately, inequities in our health care system are likely to remain, or even get worse, for the foreseeable future, as the persistence of anti-Black racism continues to be a critical barrier to enacting health policies to improve health equity.

¹⁶Wendy Sawyer, “Visualizing the Racial Disparities in Mass Incarceration,” *Prison Policy Initiative*, July 27, 2020, <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/blog/2020/07/27/disparities/>.

¹⁷“A Tale of Two Countries: Racially Targeted Arrests in the Era of Marijuana Reform,” *American Civil Liberties Union* (2020), 7-9.

¹⁸“Statistical Briefing Book,” Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, *U.S. Department of Justice*, released November 16, 2020, https://www.ojjdp.gov/ojstatbb/crime/ucr.asp?table_in=2&selYrs=2018&rdoGroups=1&rdoData=r.

¹⁹Wendy Sawyer and Peter Wagner, “Mass Incarceration: The Whole Pie 2020,” *Prison Policy Initiative*, March 24, 2020, <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/pie2020.html>

²⁰Ashley Nellis, “Still Life: America’s Increasing Use of Life and Long Term Sentences,” *Sentencing Project*, May 3, 2017, <https://www.sentencingproject.org/publications/still-life-americas-increasing-use-life-long-term-sentences/>.

²¹David R. Williams and Michelle Sternthal, “Understanding Racial-Ethnic Disparities in Health: Sociological Contributions,” *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* 51, suppl (2010): S15-S27, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1177%2F0022146510383838>.

²²Arlene T. Geronimus et al., “Do US Black Women Experience Stress Related Accelerated Biological Aging?: A Novel Theory and First Population-Based Test of Black-White Differences in Telomere Length,” *Human Nature* 21, no. 1 (March 2010): 19-38, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12110-010-9078-0>.

²³Saraswathi Vedam et al., “The Giving Voice to Mothers Study: Inequity and Mistreatment during Pregnancy and Childbirth in the United States,” *Reproductive Health* 16, no. 1 (June 2019): 1-18, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12978-019-0729-2>; . Jamie C. Slaughter-Acey et al., “Skin Tone Matters: Racial Microaggressions and Delayed Prenatal Care,” *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* 57, no. 3 (September 2019): 321-329, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.amepre.2019.04.014>.

Social Conceptions of Value

Anti-Black racism affects social conceptions of value in a myriad of ways. When Black people were stolen from their homeland and sold into slavery, we were valued for our labor but not valued as human beings. As noted above, the framers of the Constitution—all white men—originally assigned a value of three-fifths of a human being to Black folks. This was the result of a compromise made by Southern whites who wanted to boost their representation in Congress and Northern whites who did not want Blacks to be counted at all.

Black people were abused, raped, castrated, and malnourished, among other things, throughout the nearly 250 years of slavery in this country. When slavery was abolished, Blacks were not given any restitution for the malevolence we endured. Instead, anti-Black racism took the form of white hoods and racist laws that did not allow Black people to experience any true freedom at all. As such, our value to American society has been rooted in our economic contribution (whether as enslaved people, prisoners, laborers, or consumers) rather than in our humanity. As a result, when Black people are mistreated, discriminated against, abused, or murdered, there is little concern among the powers that be.

In addition, anti-Black bigotry encourages the public to dismiss harm when it is done to communities of oppressed populations. Throughout the history of this country, and even presently, Black people have been publicly attacked—physically and otherwise—without any significant response from the general public. Still to this day, whether it is in the wake of a police shooting or in some other context, Black people have had to educate white America about the history of violence against our communities and the current acts of brutality, both figurative and literal, that continue to dominate the present Black condition.

All bigotry feeds on ambivalence. As the late Desmond Tutu once said, “If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor.” But in order for the public—and white America in particular—to become invested in pushing back against anti-Blackness, they must find and appreciate the real value of the Black experience.

Liberation

“Nobody’s free until we are all free” - Fannie Lou Hamer.

All forms of bigotry insist that any defending of one oppressed group requires us not to defend anyone else. Conservatives, the alt right, and others consistently argue, for instance, that supporting BlackLivesMatter requires removing other people—including other oppressed groups—from the conversation.

This is not the case. Quite the contrary. We are not free until we are all free. As such, Black liberation, and the liberation of all oppressed people, is essential to the liberation of our society as a whole.

When discussing Black folks and the impact of anti-Black racism, we must also include our trans nibblings and queer family. We have to include our Black family who use wheelchairs, hearing aids or visual assistance. We have to include our Black indigenous family, Afro Latino/a, and Black family within the diaspora. We have to include Black people with mental illness, physical ailments and neurodiverse learning challenges.

When we talk about Black folks we are talking about everyone. As such, the authors tried to ensure that the focus groups associated with this project reflected as many perspectives and experiences as possible. While all of the participants identified as Black, the groups were intentionally diverse with respect to gender, sexuality, complexion, occupation/socioeconomic status, religion, and level of formal education, among other characteristics. Interestingly, despite that significant diversity, the participants had a shared understanding of anti-Blackness and the challenges of navigating (and also celebrating) their own Blackness as they move through the world. Indeed, when asked to define “Blackness,” a number of participants referenced the culture of community and shared experiences that bind us together, notwithstanding the nuances of our particular life experiences.

So, what does it look like for Black folks to be liberated?

It looks like a summer day. A day where everyone can be themselves, food is accessible and community is true. It is freedom. It is police-less, cage-less and rent-less. It is fair and safe and inclusive of all.

True liberation can only be achieved through accountability to our history and the consideration of our past decisions in the present. This can be done, in part, through the provision of reparations to Black people and communities, and the defunding of the police and reinvestment in communities. In addition, this can be achieved through concrete, policy-based efforts to end medical racism, eradicate food deserts, hold the mainstream media accountable for its role in perpetuating anti-Black narratives and imagery, and revolutionize the educational system in this country.

True liberation looks like a full acceptance of Black humanity, as innocent and free as a default mindset mentality for any Black body no matter what; a *‘yes, and’* rather than, *‘yes, but’* mentality; a full understanding of the realities that Black people face in all facets of their lives and the realities that come with it. These are some core examples that would shift how policy is developed, designed, and implemented, and revolutionize how we think about and move towards true and lasting liberation.