



Preface

We live in racial smog. This is a world of racial smog. We can't help but breathe that smog. Everybody breathes it. But what's nice is that you can recognize that you are breathing that smog, and that's the first step.

—Alan Goodman, biological anthropologist

The United States of America is a relatively young nation, though one that has been beset with racial strife from its inception. As Europeans descended upon its shores in search of new lands, new beginnings, and new opportunities, they engaged in brutal conflict with Indigenous peoples already inhabiting those lands; they exploited Black labor for nearly 250 years of its history, building the nation's wealth as well as their personal fortunes on the backs of Africans, their descendants, and other people of color; and, as holders of power, they fashioned a society that, even in the twenty-first century, remains defined by systemic racism and racial inequality.

Many Americans are unaware of much of this nation's racial history and its lasting effect on contemporary race relations. Students typically learn about slavery, Jim Crow segregation, and the triumphs of the civil rights movement. However, schools tend to downplay many of the details, as well as other aspects of America's racist past, leaving many Americans ignorant to the nation's history of systemic violence and exclusion of people of color from many facets of American life. For example, students

learn of the virtues of the Founding Fathers, such as Thomas Jefferson, who famously wrote that “All Men Are Created Equal” in the Declaration of Independence; they are far less likely to learn that at the time he penned these words, Jefferson was profiting handsomely from the enslavement of hundreds of people on his Virginia plantation.

Many learn about European conflict with Native Americans over land, but they often know few details, if any, about state- and federal-sponsored violence toward Indigenous people, the government sterilization of Indigenous women, or the decades-long effort by the federal government to forcibly assimilate their children. Many Americans are educated about the Civil War and the abolishment of slavery but they typically learn little about Black codes pressed into law in Southern states soon after the war ended that effectively denied newly freed Blacks their basic constitutional rights (e.g., to vote, bear arms, own property, buy and lease land, and more). Even fewer Americans learn that because of these Black codes and similar restrictive laws, Black people were frequently arrested and imprisoned in the Jim Crow era for trivial offenses—such as for being unemployed, lacking a permanent residence, swearing, disrespecting a white employer, or keeping a “disorderly house” (offenses that were specifically criminalized for Blacks). As prisoners, many were then forced to labor for planters and industrialists through a system of convict leasing; consequently, thousands of Black men found themselves essentially re-enslaved in the post-Civil War era and well into the 1930s.

Many Americans know something about lynching, but rarely do they learn that lynching was widely used by whites in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as a tool of domestic terrorism to keep newly freed African Americans “in their place.” Just as in the case for whites, Blacks were lynched for serious offenses such as alleged rape or murder, but many Americans are wholly unaware that Blacks were also lynched for perceived transgressions of Jim Crow norms (e.g., for acting insolent or “uppity” to a white person or, if male, for engaging in a relationship or even socializing with a white woman). For example, in 1955, Emmett Till, a 14-year-old African American boy, was brutally beaten and murdered in Mississippi by two white men for allegedly whistling at a white woman. His “offense” left him disfigured and completely unrecognizable and, even though only a child, he and his family paid an unbearable price—his life. Thousands of other Black men and women met similar fates for trivial transgressions, and their deaths, often public spectacles, were flaunted as dire warnings to other Black people who might dare violate the perceived racial order of the era.

Many learn about race riots but not about race massacres. For example, many people are aware of the riots of the 1960s and the urban destruction associated with some of the Black Lives Matter protests in the twenty-first century. However, they often know little, if anything, about the massacres of people of color in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that took place in Los Angeles, California (1871); Rock Springs, Wyoming (1885); Pine Ridge Indian Reservation, South Dakota (1890); East St. Louis, Illinois (1917); Chicago, Illinois (1919); Elaine, Arkansas (1919); Rosewood, Florida (1923); and other cities and towns across the nation. For instance, most Americans are unaware that white mobs massacred hundreds of Black Americans in Elaine, Arkansas in 1919 or that in Rosewood, Florida in 1923, whites killed 27 to 150 Black residents and incinerated every structure in the Black town (regarding the latter, no resident returned and the town ceased to exist). Most people also usually do not know that in Tulsa, Oklahoma in 1921, white mobs descended upon the wealthy Black district (then unofficially dubbed the “Black Wall Street”), burned all 35 city blocks to the ground, looted their homes, and killed dozens of Black people while permanently driving out hundreds more. Americans rarely learn that this was the first time in history that an American city was bombed from the air as white citizens dropped explosives from airplanes onto Black-owned homes and businesses.

Many Americans can recount stories of racially segregated lunch counters, buses, and schools in the Jim Crow South but they are often unaware of restrictive covenants and racial zoning laws that formally segregated American cities both within and beyond the South. They seldom learn of the thousands of towns, suburbs, and counties across the nation (most often outside Southern states) that explicitly barred people of color, especially African Americans, from residing within their limits, nor do they learn of the intimidation and violence widely used in the twentieth century to maintain white-only communities. Some Americans are also aware of the efforts by the U.S. government to make housing loans relatively affordable to working-class Americans after World War II—which, for the first time in U.S. history, made the dream of owning a home a reality for millions of families. However, many are unfamiliar with the decades-long practice by this same government to systematically deny these loans to people of color—simply because they were not white—consequently depriving them of a key instrument of wealth accumulation granted to their white counterparts. White families built equity over time while Black families were shut out of the housing market; the chilling effect of this government policy remains visible today and can be

observed in the present-day disparity in wealth between Black and white Americans.

Because of these gaps in American education and collective memory, contemporary race relations remain baffling to some. Some Americans, no doubt frustrated with persistent interracial conflict in the United States, wonder, “Will we ever move beyond our racial problems and get along?” or they question why some racial groups cannot simply “get over the past” and “move on.” Additionally, present-day social class disparities between racial groups are often rationalized not as a consequence of historical circumstance and centuries of systemic oppression but rather as the result of inherent racial and cultural differences. In other words, if a racial group is not doing well economically in twenty-first-century America, it must be their own fault (e.g., they must be intellectually challenged or lazy). Widespread ignorance of the nation’s history and the social forces that have long shaped today’s socioeconomic hierarchy have left many bereft of context, hampering the ability of many Americans to make sense of the racial inequality that they see around them.

Moreover, present-day racism as an explanatory factor of contemporary inequality in the United States is often downplayed, ignored, or simply denied altogether. In 2020, when asked by a reporter about the existence of systemic racism in the United States, then President Donald Trump flatly remarked, “I don’t believe that.” He is certainly not alone. Skepticism, or even disbelief, in systemic racism by politicians, pundits, and laymen alike is hardly surprising given that systemic racism is difficult to detect with the naked eye. If a person of color is denied a small business loan or passed over for a job, how would they know whether it was because of racism or something else? If living with hypertension or dying of lung cancer, how many Black people would consider systemic racism to be a contributing factor? If led to believe that “crime is largely a Black problem,” how many Americans would recognize that systemic racism in the media and the criminal justice system contributed to that myth? A growing number of empirical studies, however, confirm that systemic racism in the United States is very real and that it lives and thrives across many American social institutions, including in housing, education, work, health care, banking, criminal justice, and the media, among others. Collectively, this research provides an unobstructed view into the different opportunities afforded to white Americans as compared to Americans of color—and the ways those differences shape how people of different races experience life in the United States.

This book provides historical context and draws on the growing body of scholarly research to answer frequently asked questions regarding race

in the United States. In doing so, it addresses commonly held myths about the concept of race itself, power and privilege in American society, systemic racism, crime and criminal justice, social policy, immigration, and the belief in a post-racial America. America is a multiracial society, and race relations in America are complex. Rather than rely on one's own biases and limited personal experiences, attention to both historical circumstances and contemporary research provide an opportunity for Americans of all racial groups to take a step back to examine race in the United States with a more focused lens. That is the aim of this book.