

The History of Enslavement in the Western Hemisphere



Two definitions to keep in mind

Prejudice is a negative preconception or attitude toward members of a group based on shared characteristics such as race, ethnicity, sex, sexuality, age, religion, language, class, or culture. Prejudice can be racial, but it can also be sexist, ageist, or classist, for example.

Prejudiced beliefs are usually learned early in life and can affect behavior in subtle and overt ways.¹

Racism is directed at a particular racial group and is based on systems of power and oppression. Racism is often seen as being a problem with individual racial prejudice, but it is important to recognize that it is much more multifaceted and systemic.

¹ Olson, M. A., & Zabel, K. L. (2016). Measures of prejudice. In T. D. Nelson (Ed.), *Handbook of prejudice, stereotyping, and discrimination* (pp. 175–211). Psychology Press.

People commonly think of racism in terms of overt individual actions and ideologies (the social-psychological understanding), but it also exists within systems, organizations, and cultures (the cultural-psychological understanding). In this way, racism is embedded in the reality of everyday life.

Since racism is part of daily life, cultural patterns, and historical narratives in European, and European Settler-States (i.e. Canada, United States, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa . . .), it is often difficult for people to see how familiar and normalized ideas promote racialized views and behaviors.²

In her book, *This Book is Anti-Racist*, Tiffany Jewell defines racism as:

Racism is a system of advantages and disadvantages based on Race.

OR

Prejudice + Power = Racism

The belief that members of each race have different characteristics, because of this Folx [folks] believe that some are inferior, and some are superior.³

- The history of slavery is as old as humanity. Peter Frankopan's *The Silk Roads*, highlights the practice amongst the Viking Rus who traded with the empires of Central Asia, including great centres like Baghdad. The enslaved were largely taken from Slavic peoples, hence the word *slave*.



Trade routes (via the great rivers of the Steppe) of the Viking Rus.

² Adapted from Cuncic, A. (2022, February 2). The psychology of racism. Verywell Mind. Retrieved March 1, 2022, from <https://www.verywellmind.com/the-psychology-of-racism-5070459>

³ Tiffany Jewell, *This Book is Anti-Racist*, (Quarto Publishing, 2020), 30.

- Frankopan writes “*Slave markets thrived across central Europe, stocked with men, women and children waiting to be trafficked to the east . . . By the mid-tenth century Prague had become a major commercial centre attracting Viking Rus’ and Muslim merchants to buy and sell tin, furs, and people.*”⁴

Frankopan continues later his chapter, writing:⁵

Muslim traders were highly active in the Mediterranean. Men, women and children were brought from all over northern Europe to Marseilles where there was a busy market for buying and selling slaves—often passing through subsidiary markets such as Rouen, where Irish and Flemish slaves were sold to third parties.³⁰ Rome was another key slave-trading centre—though some found this repugnant. In 776, Pope Hadrian I decried the sale of humans like livestock, condemning the sale of men and women to “the unspeakable race of Saracens.” Some, he claimed, had boarded ships bound for the east voluntarily, “having no other hope of staying alive” because of recent famine and crushing poverty. Nevertheless, “we have never sunk to such a disgraceful act” of selling fellow Christians, he wrote, “and God forbid that we should.”³¹ So widespread was slavery in the Mediterranean and the Arabic world that even today regular greetings reference human trafficking. All over Italy, when they meet, people say to each other, “*schiaivo*,” from a Venetian dialect. “*Ciao*,” as it is more commonly spelt, does not mean “hello”; it means “I am your slave.”³²

- According to *Stamped From the Beginning* (Ibram X. Kendi): “After Arab Muslims conquered parts of North Africa, Portugal, and Spain during the seventh century, Christians and Muslims battled for centuries over the prize of Mediterranean supremacy. Meanwhile, below the Sahara Desert, the West African Empires of Ghana (700-1200), Mali (1200-1500), and Songhay (1350-1600) were situated at the crossroads of the lucrative trade routes for gold and salt.

⁴ Peter Frankopan, *The Silk Roads: A New History of the World*, (Vintage, 2015), 117.

⁵ Ibid, 118-119.

- A robust trans-Saharan trade emerged, allowing Europeans to obtain West African goods through Muslim intermediaries.”⁶
 - Arabic people began trading in enslaved Slavic and African peoples.
 - In 1415, Prince Henry (*the Navigator*, 1394-1460) of Portugal convinced his father, King John of Portugal, to capture the Emirate of Granada’s trading post of Ceuta (North African coast) so they could “eliminate the Islamic middleman so they could find the southern source of gold and Black captives.”⁷



- Prince Henry become the first European to sail beyond the Western Sahara’s Cape Bojador in order to capture and enslave Africans. On August 6th, 1444, Henry auctioned 240 enslaved Africans in Lagos, announcing Portugal’s entry into the group of slave-trading nations.⁸
 - Slowly, Europe’s trade in enslaved Africans began to eclipse that of other enslaved peoples.

⁶ Ibram X. Kendi, *Stamped from the Beginning*, (New York: Bold Type Books, 2016), 19.

⁷ Ibid, 22.

⁸ Ibid, 25.

- The Portuguese came the primary source of knowledge on Africa and African People for the slave-trading nations of Spain, Holland, France and England. The lens through which the Portuguese saw and presented African people – justifying their enslavement – was shaped by writers such as Gomes Eanes de Zurara that promoted, as explained by Ibram Kendi, the racist “Climate Theory”:

- **Climate Theory:** Originally from Aristotle, this racist theory said that African People were “inferior” due to the hot African climate (and Europeans were better due to their more temperate climate which was reflected in their lighter skin tones).
 - Kendi argues that the “Climate Theory” of race would produce the first assimilationists – “Black People could be made like White People if they were moved to cooler climates”

Another theory would be added in the 16th century:

- **Curse Theory:** English travel writer George Best encountered Inuit on an Arctic voyage in 1577 that had darker skin, challenging the popular “climate theory.” Best offered another theory based on his interpretation of the Bible’s Noah and the Ark story (this interpretation has a lineage that goes back to Islamic and Hebrew sources)⁹. In Best’s version Noah orders his sons to abstain from sex whilst they were on the Ark – his son Ham disobeys and he and his descendants (Black Africans) are cursed.
 - Kendi argues that the “Curse Theory” of race would produce the first segregationists – “Black People were naturally and permanently inferior”¹⁰

- The Portuguese constructed Elmina Castle in West Africa (see a [3D rendering here](#)) which quickly became the centre of the European slave trade.
 - One of the daughters of Prince Henry the Navigator’s Genoese protégés married Christopher Columbus (who likely had experience trading in West Africa).

⁹ Ibram X. Kendi, 21.

¹⁰ Ibid, 31-32.

- Spanish explorers and conquerors sought laborers to work lands in the Caribbean and Americas. As imported diseases ravaged Indigenous populations, the Spanish found themselves surrounded by vast tracts of land but with few laborers to work it.
 - The Spanish attempted to harness the labour of those who survived the diseases, but Indigenous Peoples frequently revolted or escaped to the hinterland.
 - Vocal advocates of reform, most notably Dominican priest Bartolomé de las Casas, persuaded many in Spain that the abuses suffered by the Tíano at the hands of Spanish colonists were unacceptable on moral and religious grounds.

Because with great care we have procured the conversion of the Indians to our Holy Catholic Faith, and furthermore, if there are still people there who are doubtful of the faith in their own conversions, it would be a hindrance [to them], and therefore we will not permit, nor allow to go there [to the Americas] Moors nor Jews nor heretics nor reconciled heretics, nor persons who are recently converted to our faith, except if they are black slaves, or other slaves, that have been born under the dominion of our natural Christian subjects.

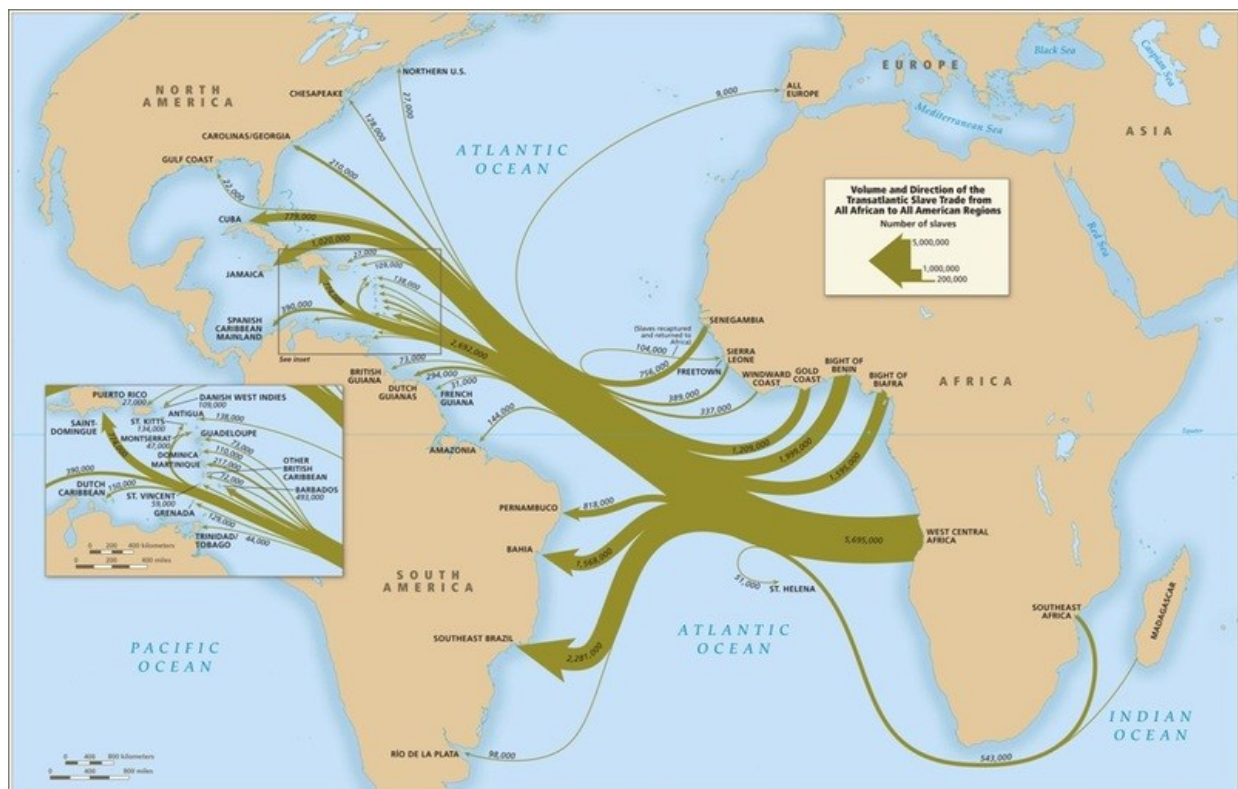
- A letter from Spanish monarchs Ferdinand and Isabel to Nicolas Ovando (the 3rd Spanish Governor of the Indies) allowing black slaves of African descent to be imported to Hispaniola (present day Dominican Republic and Haiti), 16 September 1501

*"The Indies" is how the Spanish referred to the Western Hemispheric lands. Christopher Columbus was the first Governor of the Indies.

- The first enslaved African arrived in Hispaniola, via the Portuguese, in 1502.
 - Many of the first enslaved Africans escaped into the interior of Hispaniola, participating in various resistance campaigns with the Tíano.
- In 1518, Emperor Charles V (Fernando and Isabel's grandson), issued a charter allowing four thousand enslaved Africans to be purchased directly from Portuguese traders in the Cape Verde Islands. The first slave ships presently known to have sailed with captives directly from Africa to the Americas embarked from the Cape Verde Islands and São Tomé, arriving in Hispaniola, Puerto Rico, and Cuba during the mid-1520s.¹¹

¹¹ Wise, C., & Wheat, D. (n.d.). The early trans-atlantic slave Trade: Emperor Charles V · African laborers for a NEW empire: Iberia, slavery, and the Atlantic World · Lowcountry digital HISTORY INITIATIVE. Retrieved March 15, 2021, from http://ldhi.library.cofc.edu/exhibits/show/african_laborers_for_a_new_emp/emperor_charles_v

- The Spanish Crown increasingly relied on large-scale slaving ventures based on contracts, or *asientos*, in which merchant houses agreed to transport a certain number of captives to Spanish American ports over a set period of time.
 - Due to the participation of non-Hispanic merchants—especially the Portuguese during the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, but also the Genoese and Germans, and later the English, French, and Dutch—the *asiento* system helped to internationalize the trans-Atlantic slave trade long before the establishment of non-Iberian colonies in the Americas, or non-Iberian trading factories in western Africa.¹²
- In 1542 “New Laws of the Indies for the Good Treatment and Preservation of the Indians,” are passed which abolished the enslavement of the Tíano in favour of Africans.
- Spain’s use of enslaved sub-Saharan Africans in its early Caribbean colonies set a precedent that was soon followed by other European powers, and beginning in the late 1600s, non-Iberian colonies developed forms of plantation slavery that would come to dominate much of the tropical Americas until the nineteenth century.¹³



¹² Wise, C., & Wheat, D. (n.d.). The early trans-atlantic slave Trade: Emperor Charles V · African laborers for a NEW empire: Iberia, slavery, and the Atlantic World · Lowcountry digital HISTORY INITIATIVE. Retrieved March 15, 2021, from <http://ldhi.library.cofc.edu/exhibits/show/african-laborers-for-a-new-emp/emperor-charles-v>

¹³ Wise, C., & Wheat, D. (n.d.). Conclusion · African laborers for a NEW empire: Iberia, slavery, and the Atlantic World · Lowcountry digital HISTORY INITIATIVE. Retrieved March 15, 2021, from http://ldhi.library.cofc.edu/exhibits/show/african_laborers_for_a_new_emp/conclusion_african_laborers