

YASSMIN ABDEL-MAGIED

# STAND UP AND SPEAK OUT AGAINST RACISM

ILLUSTRATED BY ALEESHA NANDHRA





*To all the young people (and young at heart)  
who want to change the world for the better*

**Yx**

*To Mum, for making me feel like I could do anything  
that I set my mind to*

**A**

Specialist edits by Sofia Akel,  
Race Equity Researcher and Black Studies Lecturer

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SPEAK OUT  
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WALKER BOOKS

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# INTRODUCTION

HELLO THERE! I'M YASSMIN ABDEL-MAGIED,  
AND I'M SO EXCITED YOU'RE READING THIS BOOK.

I was born in Sudan, brought up in Meeanjin (present-day Brisbane, Australia), and now live in London, the capital city of the United Kingdom. In the UK, I am considered a Black (African) woman.

I also wear the hijab as part of my practice as a Muslim woman. There's a lot going on! But I'm more than just my "race" (Black), ethnicity (Sudanese), language group (Arabic), visa status (immigrant), or gender (cis woman). I'm also an engineer (I've designed my own race car), a writer (this is my fifth book), and an advocate for social justice. For me, social justice is about making the world fairer and safer for us all. That's why I decided to write this book. Right now, we live in a world where life is like climbing up a big, tall, scary mountain, and when we are born, we all get a different set of tools to climb it.



SOME PEOPLE  
GET ACCESS TO  
A CABLE CAR.



OTHERS HAVE TO  
USE THE STAIRS.



SOME PEOPLE  
HAVE THEIR  
WAY BLOCKED.

# IMAGINARY MOUNTAIN OF LIFE



**THE LUCKIEST GET  
A JETPACK.**



**SOME PEOPLE HAVE  
TO WEAR BACKPACKS  
WEIGHED DOWN  
WITH LEAD.**



It doesn't seem very fair, does it?

This book focuses on how “race” and racism affect the way different people go up the mountain, depending on the group (in this case “race”) they have been put into.

How can we make the climb fair for everyone?

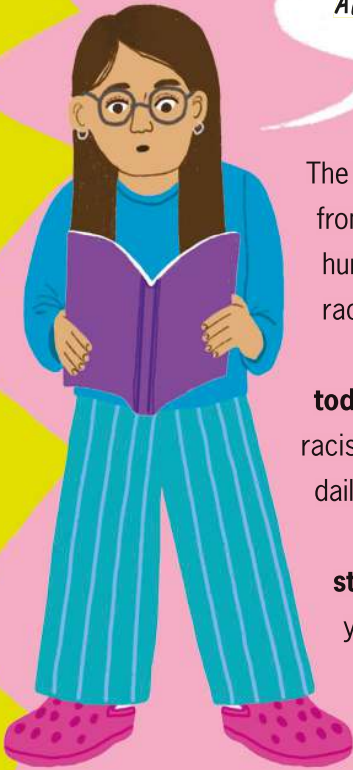
I visited young people in schools around the UK and asked what they wanted to know about racism and how to fight for racial justice.

Each chapter in this book answers some of their questions, and many more. What you learn will help you understand why racism exists, how it plays out, and what we can all do about it so that Earth is a safer, fairer place for us all, inshallah!

**“Inshallah” is an Arabic word meaning “God willing.”  
It’s used by Muslims and Arabic speakers of many  
religions to talk about events we hope will happen  
in the future. It’s like a version of “Fingers crossed!”**

# ABOUT THIS BOOK

*STAND UP AND SPEAK OUT  
AGAINST RACISM IS SPLIT INTO THREE  
MAIN SECTIONS.*



The first deals with **how racism started**: where it came from and why it exists. It talks about the history, over hundreds of years, to help explain the background to racism.

Section two is all about **what racism looks like today**. You will learn about the four different ways racism shows up, as well as the impact of racism on the daily lives of everyday people, like you and me!

The final section is all about action: **How do we stand up and speak out against racism?** Here you will find tactics, tips, and tricks to help you get started, as well as answers to many of the questions young people asked me about this challenging topic. And speaking of challenging topics, I want to give you a heads-up before we begin.

Racism can be a heavy issue to discuss, whoever you are. Some of what you read in this book might make you feel sad or uncomfortable, or bring up feelings of guilt, shame, anger, and frustration. That is OK. It is normal to feel heavy emotions when it comes to topics like this. My advice?

**First:** Remember to breathe. If you are feeling really intense emotions, it is fine to put the book down and take at least three long, deep breaths. I always find this calming when I get a bit stressed out.

**Second:** Notice what it is you are feeling and ask yourself where that feeling has come from. Are you remembering a moment when you were on the receiving end of a racist act? Are you feeling guilty about something you said?

**Third:** Find a way to express that emotion safely. Maybe write down how you are feeling, or speak to a trusted adult or knowledgeable friend. It can be helpful to read this book alongside another person so you have someone else to turn to and discuss what you are learning.



You'll see boxes like this throughout the book, giving you extra pieces of interesting information and asking questions to get you thinking more deeply about the things you've discovered.

## OTHER NOTES

- You don't have to read this book cover to cover, from front to back. Take it little by little, put it down if it gets to be too much, think about what you are learning, and come back to it when it feels right. We are all on a journey, and we can all take it at our own pace.
- If you see a word underlined in ***bold italics***, you can turn to the glossary (pages 122–125) to learn its definition. There are also pages at the back (120–121) where you'll find further information about inspiring people or groups who have resisted the impacts of racial injustice.

OK! YOU READY?  
LET'S GET INTO IT!






**HOW  
DID  
RACISM  
START?**

# WHY DOES RACISM EXIST?

Hundreds of years ago, there wasn't such a thing as "race" or "racism." Then some cunning people came up with a way to group people together to gain power, control, and money.



WHAT ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT, YASSMIN?! HOW DOES WHETHER PEOPLE THINK I'M BLACK OR WHITE OR SOMETHING ELSE HAVE ANYTHING TO DO WITH MONEY?

Why, I'm glad you asked. From the fifteenth century onward, European countries like Spain, Portugal, France, Belgium, Germany, the Netherlands, and England sailed around the world and started **colonizing** other countries. They captured people, stealing them away from their homes, **enslaving** them, forcing them to work for free under terrible conditions. They also traded people as if they were property: the more people you "owned" (or enslaved), the wealthier you were. It was pretty grim. The Europeans needed some way of justifying all the bad things they were doing to make it sound . . . legit, and not as awful as it actually was. Some of what they did included . . .

**putting people into different groups called “races” based on physical features like skin color, hair texture—or even the size of their heads . . .**

**saying that people of some “races” were better than others (which obviously wasn’t true) . . .**

**introducing laws targeting people based on the groups the Europeans had created, like saying that “Black” people could be considered property and so didn’t have rights like “white” people.**



The idea of different “races” started because European countries wanted ways to control and make money off of people from other places around the world without feeling like they were doing a bad thing. If some people were less human than you, then it was all OK, right?

Of course, it was not OK. Sadly, it took a long time for Europeans to change their ways because this way of doing things had been presented as “normal” and “civilized” by those in power. By the time laws started to change, the damage was done.



But that was hundreds of years ago, you might be thinking. What's that got to do with today? Well, it's important to know that things that happen today often have links to what happened in the past. Like . . . for a tree to be a tree, someone in the past had to plant a seed. A tree needs water, sunlight, and all that good stuff, and eventually it'll become a big, strong tree with deep roots, right?

Similarly, racism exists today because, in the past, some powerful European colonizers decided they were the best people in the world. They wanted everything for themselves, and they did anything they could to get it. The systems and attitudes that they put in place have (like water and sunlight) enabled racism to put down deep roots and keep growing.



**DISTRIBUTION  
OF WEALTH**

**UNDERSTANDING  
OF HISTORY**

**COLONIALISM**

**SLAVERY**

**SEEDS OF RACISM  
PLANTED HUNDREDS OF  
YEARS AGO . . .**

ATTITUDES PASSED  
DOWN THROUGH EACH  
GENERATION

MANY, MANY MORE  
ISSUES—SOME BIG, SOME  
SMALL, BUT ALL OF THEM  
IMPORTANT

# RACISM TODAY

## IS IT TRUE?

Were Europeans the only people hungry for power, control, and money? Of course not! Throughout history, there have been people from many different *imperialist* societies who invaded lands, stole wealth, and *oppressed* others for their own gain. There was Genghis Khan of the Mongol Empire, the Tang dynasty of China, the tsars of the Russian Empire, and many, many more. Power-hungry people exist in every society. The important thing to remember about the conversation about racism, and why we focus on the Europeans, is that we are still living with the *legacy* of European colonialism today.

SLAVERY AND  
COLONIZATION WENT  
ON FOR HUNDREDS OF  
YEARS, SO IT WILL TAKE  
US A WHILE (AND A LOT OF  
WORK) TO UNDO IT ALL. BUT  
THAT'S WHY WE NEED YOUR  
HELP TO MAKE THINGS  
BETTER!

# DID YOU KNOW?

The English were among the first to codify, or put into law, the idea of a “white race” and a “Black race.” In 1661, English colonizers created something known as the Barbados Slave Code. It stated that if you were “Black,” you were “owned” and didn’t have any rights as a human being. The law gave white people the right to torture and murder Black people without facing any punishment. Rules like these slave codes formed the roots of the racist world we live in today.

The codes also served a second purpose. They divided Black people from other workers. Even if they did the same job, non-Black workers had a higher status than Black workers. This is a classic divide-and-conquer strategy! So rather than everyone teaming up to fight the slave owners, they would turn against and resent each other. That is another thing that racism does that we need to fight: it makes us turn on each other rather than focus on working together to pull out the roots of discrimination. This still happens today. It’s super sneaky . . . and super wrong.



## Divide and Conquer

Imagine you and your nine best friends work at a shoe factory making fancy, expensive shoes. Instead of paying you, the owner of the factory gives you all five pairs of shoes that you have to share among yourselves. You fight and fight over who worked harder, over who looks best in them, over who deserves the shoes. Yet you and your friends never question the owner of the factory, who has hundreds—thousands—of shoes, about why they are keeping them all for themselves. By making you fight against one another, you get distracted from the real injustice: that you are not being paid properly for your work. This is called “divide and conquer,” and it’s a terrible, horrible tactic. Watch out for its poison!



HAVE YOU HEARD OF  
THE "SCRAMBLE FOR  
AFRICA"?

IS THAT A BOARD GAME?

I'M AFRAID IT'S  
SOMETHING A LOT MORE  
SERIOUS THAN THAT . . .



In the late 1880s, European countries were becoming more and more interested in taking what they could get from the continent of Africa. They had stolen people (through slavery), but that wasn't enough. They wanted the natural resources too—the sugar and the rubber and the gold. Rather than fight each other for resources, they came up with a pretty gross plan.

In November 1884, the first chancellor of Germany invited thirteen European powers, along with the United States, to Berlin to discuss how to split Africa up among them. Note, not a single African person was invited, and the interests of the African people were pretty much ignored in this whole process.

Beforehand, Europeans had only settled on the coast, but by the end of the Berlin Conference, they had “claimed” almost the entire continent. Before the Europeans arrived, the people who lived in Africa had their own ways of organizing themselves, depending on their **ethnic group**, language, or ancestors.

The Europeans just came in, drew some lines on a map, and said, “This is now a country!” They didn't care that the people who actually lived there didn't want to be controlled by some random Europeans. They just cared about getting more resources for their empires. They drew lines straight through tribal areas, split up communities, and generally made a total mess.

By the start of the First World War, almost all of Africa had been seized and divided up along borders that Africans played no part in deciding. This

map gives you an idea of which countries, or empires, claimed to “own” which regions of Africa. It also shows the few areas of Africa that remained ***autonomous***: Aussa, Ethiopia, Kongo, Liberia, and Mbunda.



Many African people fought and died for their freedom from the colonizers. As a result, today most African countries are independent. But things couldn't just go back to how they were “before.” The world we live in gives Africans little option but to deal with the borders decided by the colonizers. The worst part? The very countries that put them in this situation still have the most power internationally! Pretty sad, huh? Shows how a messed-up history can have a lasting impact.

# DID YOU KNOW?

There is **NO** accepted number of “races.” This is because “race” is a social invention (made up by people) rather than a biological reality, so there’s no test you can do to find out what “race” you are. And there are no agreed categories. People don’t agree on what makes a person Black, or brown, or white, or Asian, or even if those are the correct categories to use! What’s important to remember is that today’s idea of “race” was created—and sustained—to justify treating people as lesser and using them to benefit European and imperialist countries. Without colonizing and enslaving people to do all the work, these countries wouldn’t have been able to get so rich and powerful. It’s easy to make a profit if you don’t pay anyone!



TREAT ALL  
PEOPLE  
EQUALLY

There are often more differences within a so-called racial group than between groups. For example, if you have European ancestry, you might have more in common genetically with an Asian person than another European.

We don't need people to be the same as us to care that we are all treated with the same respect and care.

And did you know that many of the scientific studies that look into genetics have found that all people share over 99 percent of our DNA with each other? Even though we may look different, we are much, *much* more similar than we are different. Many differences come from the environment and other external factors and not our core biology. Cool, huh?

REMEMBER—EVEN IF "RACE" ISN'T REAL, RACIALIZATION AND RACISM DO EXIST. BUT BECAUSE THE IDEA WAS CREATED BY HUMANS, HUMAN BEINGS CAN GET RID OF IT TOO.





# IS RACISM DIFFERENT IN EVERY COUNTRY?

The Europeans used the belief that one “race” is better than all the rest to colonize countries all around the world without having to feel too guilty about it. That means racism was spread to a lot of different countries. Given how widely Europeans traveled, they spread their racism to most countries in the world. It’s definitely not the exact same in every place, BUT wherever you are in the world, the simplest way to think about racism is that it is racial **prejudice** backed by power. The thing is, who is in power can look different depending on the history of the country and who is (and was) the **dominant culture**.



## DOMINANT CULTURE

The dominant culture (usually—but not always—the majority) has the most power in society. The people in this group are in charge of institutions like the government, police, military, media, and education. They often decide what behaviors, values, and traditions are considered “normal” and “acceptable” in that society.

On the other hand, a historically **marginalized community** is a group of people who are outside the dominant culture or group. Often, if you are outside the dominant culture—even if there are a lot of you—you have less power, opportunity, and safety in society. For some groups, things have improved slightly over the years, but we still have a ways to go until we get a truly fair world.

## COLORISM

Sometimes, especially in countries without majority-white populations, the issue is **colorism**, which is the discrimination against people with darker skin. Pre-colonization, this could often reflect wealth and class differences: if you had darker skin, it might indicate that you worked outside in the sun, and if you had lighter skin, that you likely had enough money to stay inside or came from a higher-class family. This attitude, mixed with the **white supremacist hierarchy** of the Europeans, meant being white was viewed as “better” and has left us in a world where people with lighter skin are viewed more favorably than others. But we know this is wrong! All shades of skin are wonderful and beautiful.



**Who is part of the dominant culture in your society? If you're not sure, look at the people who run the country, or your city council, or even your school. Do they come from similar communities? Do they look like you, or do they look different? What does that tell you?**