

**Racism is a real
and present danger.
But we have the tools to fight it.**

When Khodi Dill started learning about his own history and identity, and how racism really works, his whole life changed. And as he shared his new understanding of racism and his passion for social justice, he noticed something: other people started changing, too.

Now, fueled by joy and hope, rage and sorrow, Dill dives into personal experiences and anti-oppressive education to break down how white supremacy functions in North America—and its impact on all of us. From dismantling internalized racism to decolonizing schools, joining social justice movements, and more, Dill lays out paths to personal liberation and social transformation.

Because the fight against racism is one we can win—
and it's a future worth fighting for.



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STAY UP

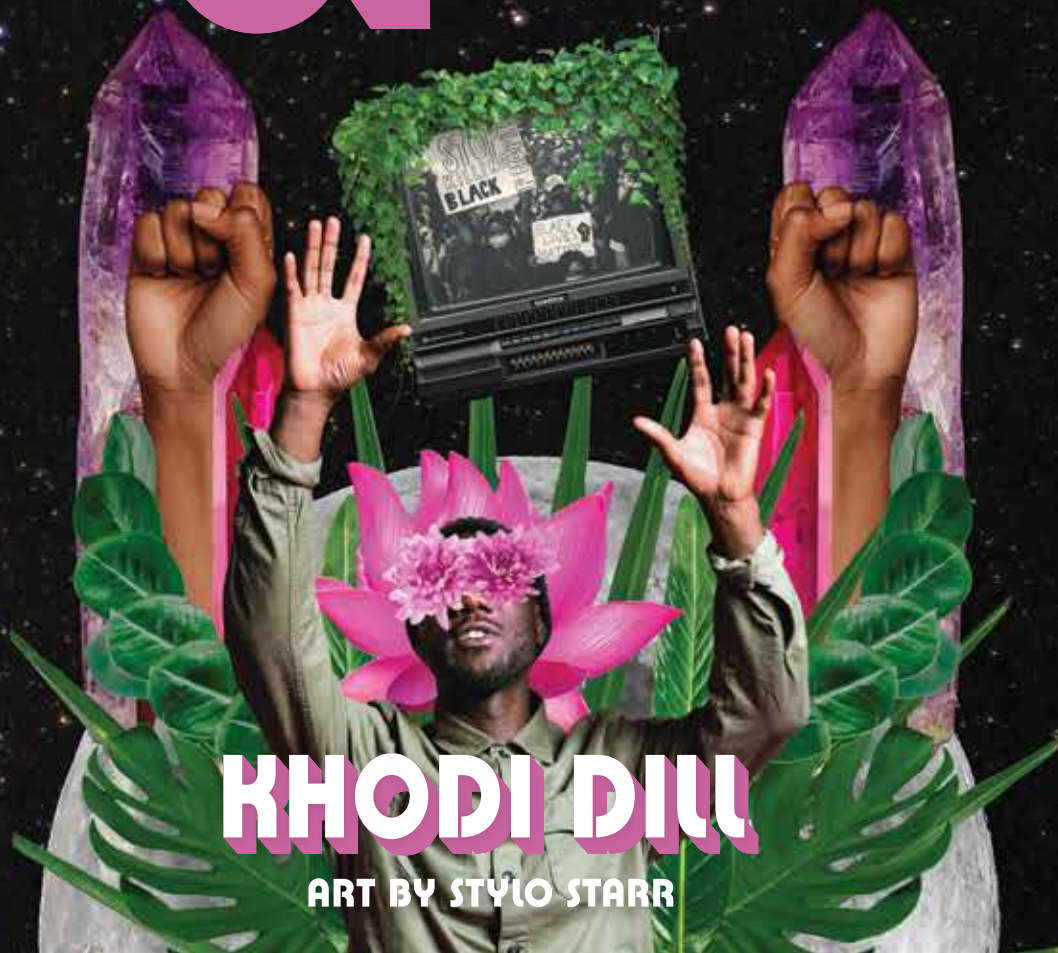
racism, resistance,
and reclaiming
Black freedom

Khodi Dill
stylo starr

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KHODI DILL

ART BY STYLO STARR

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“I hope I can live up to my ancestors’
expectation of me because I really believe that
I have a duty to all those who have come before me,
to all those who lie at the bottom of the ocean, to all those
who lost their lives, whether it’s in cane fields or the cotton
fields or, you know, hanging off some
tree, to continue this struggle, and to continue
to love and to continue to believe and to
continue to try to be human.”

—Assata Shakur, *The Eyes of the Rainbow*

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the land

The anti-racism work and the writing that I do take place on Treaty Six territory. Without the solemn agreements of treaty, I could not do the work that I do, nor live the life that I live here on the beautiful prairie lands of Saskatchewan, Canada, where I raise my children and dream for their futures. Saskatchewan is located on the traditional and ancestral territories of several Indigenous Peoples, including the Dene, Cree, Saulteaux, Lakota, Dakota, Nakoda, and Métis Peoples. Many of these nations have their own names for themselves in their own languages. It is on these lands where I was educated about anti-racism by some of the world's leading academics, most of them Indigenous women scholars, whose brave practice here has improved both education and society in our country and our world. Here, I affirm my commitment to support the important work of decolonizing this land, our society, its institutions, and its minds, and to support the difficult but crucial work of truth-telling and amends-making, now and in the future. Colonization is ongoing here, and so too must be our resistance.

author's note

The memories in this book are accurate as I remember them. Occasionally, the names of those involved have been changed or omitted in order to protect their anonymity.

At times, a racial slur used historically to target Black people appears in this book. Trust that I don't take including it here lightly. But the suppression of stories of anti-Black violence has been used to silence and discredit our people for hundreds of years. As Black people we must reserve the right to tell others the names that people have called us in order to diminish, demean, and dehumanize us. They created a word to help distinguish us from them and have used that word and its consequences to this day to justify our ongoing mistreatment and our deaths the world over. That is the story that I am telling in this book, and so I've decided to include the word here in full wherever it is relevant. It should go without saying that not everyone in the Black community will agree on this issue, but know that many within the community do agree on one thing for certain:

If you're not Black, **don't say it**. That goes for read-alouds and sing-alongs, too.





introduction

Have you checked your news feed lately? It's overwhelming out here. It's beatings and murders and shootings and demonstrations and wrongful convictions and wrongful deaths, and hell, even wrongful acquittals going on. And all this has been happening damn near cyclically for decades. It's easy to let it all catch up to you, overtake you, immobilize you. That's exactly how I felt when I watched the police killing of Philando Castile, a 32-year-old Black man, in Minnesota in 2016. Castile was driving one night in July when police stopped him and killed him in front of his partner, Diamond Reynolds, and her 4-year-old daughter, who were both in the car.

No matter the details of the incident, the motive for the killing, or the fact that Castile had been stopped by police a total of 49 times in the 13 years leading up to his death, watching the incident on video from my home in Canada changed a lot for me. First off, it changed *me*, like who I was, at the core. Immediately after seeing it, I fell victim to that same old immobility; I curled up in a fetal position and remained there, mentally and emotionally, for months. I stopped engaging with anti-racism for a time, withdrew socially, and stopped writing and creating as well. It was the first time that I had experienced a setback of such magnitude. It made it clear to me that anti-Black racism was a trauma that could impact me and all Black people even from a great distance. And its painful blows stay comin' relentlessly.

Because of that, I've realized that our work in fighting racism must be relentless too, though not without rest. That's why now, during a time of both ample motivation and sufficient means, amid increasingly rampant racial injustice and division, I've decided to write this book. Thank you for joining me, for showing interest, for wanting to listen and maybe learn a little bit too. I believe that when we make the decision to truly listen to each other, we become like family, so I hope you don't mind me thinking of you as such and calling you that, too—family. It's a term of endearment, respect, maybe gratitude for what we can all accomplish together in the future, or what we can *transform* in our lives and our society. Those of you who are young readers are aptly poised to take on this work—full of promise, creativity, and, possibly, angst over the alarming state of the world. Trust me; that angst is a normal human response to what is, at times, a dreadful reality. The state of the world *is* alarming. So please, don't try to stifle that angst. It's a necessary feeling, a feeling *everybody* should have in the face of injustice, and one that we can use as fuel for our ever-important fight.

We wouldn't be like family if I didn't introduce and locate myself for you. I live and work on Treaty Six territory in what is currently widely known as Saskatchewan, Canada. I identify as biracial and Black. My

father is white and my mother is Black. I am middle-aged, middle-class, straight, and non-disabled. I identify with the masculine gender I was assigned at my birth, which took place in Nassau, Bahamas, in 1983. Not long after my arrival, my family relocated, and I was raised alongside my older sister Chrissy here on the Great Plains of Canada, in Saskatchewan, a province whose name is derived from a Cree word, *kisiskāciwuni-sīpiy*, meaning “swift-flowing river.”

In my hometown of Saskatoon, the South Saskatchewan River cuts the city in half, in many ways marking a racial divide between its inhabitants. The central west side is home to many working-class Indigenous and immigrant communities, alongside some working-class and middle-class white communities, with many people living in poverty. On the east side, predominantly white and middle-class (or even richer) folks reside there. Some of these east-siders hardly dare to enter the west side, let alone think fondly of it. So you see, while they’ve written racial segregation out of policy, it still occurs economically and geographically, here and almost everywhere else too. My town and many others like it are perfect symbols of race relations in Canada, where people are largely separate, tense, aloof, suspicious, and unflinching in their entrenched beliefs about “the other,” no matter how loud or quiet they may be about these beliefs.

But it’s here in Saskatoon where I also learned that those entrenched beliefs aren’t entirely static; there are people working tirelessly at all levels of our community to change them. It’s here where I decided that I wanted to join these efforts. I received my master’s degree in Educational Foundations from the University of Saskatchewan, working under the close supervision of renowned anti-racism scholar Dr. Verna St. Denis. In my thesis research, I focused on the anti-oppressive power of artistic practice—spoken word poetry in particular, which is one of my great passions in this life. Within my own spoken word circles, I noticed that poets from marginalized communities who performed at poetry slams in Saskatoon were helping to change and better the arts community here. I

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learned so much from them and from my professors of anti-racism over the years. What I share in this book has been inspired by the ideas and art of all these powerful people. I can only hope to do them justice. In writing this work, I have also drawn on my own lived experience as a biracial Black man on the Canadian prairies, and my formal training in anti-racist, anti-oppressive, and decolonizing education.

I certainly don't have all the answers, but I've got a whole lotta questions, and I hope that this book can be a way of posing them to the world. Perhaps you can help answer some of them, or answer the call to join those of us who are fighting for the liberation of Black people, Indigenous people, and people of color everywhere. There's no perfect strategy. Even our terminology is often insufficient. In this book, I do my best to use terms that are widely acceptable at the time of writing. But times and terms change, as they should. Please forgive me if, one day, the language I've used here becomes out-of-date. Just as words change, so do people. I could not have thought to write this book 10 years ago. And 10 years from now, I may have changed some of my thinking still. In fact, I hope to have done so. Anti-racism is a lifelong process of unlearning, involving continuous personal and social transformation and betterment, which should forever be among our top priorities. Just know that the spirit of this book is one of justice for all people.

There are those who will say, "Well why would you write about race anyway? Race doesn't matter." But in the words of Dr. St. Denis, "Race matters because members of society have internalized racist ideas about what skin color tells about the value and worth of a person or a group of people." It's a privilege to be *able* to believe that race doesn't matter; usually, to hold such a belief means that you have simply never been the target of true racism. As racialized people, our lived experiences are quite different. If you're somebody who truly believes that race doesn't matter, maybe reading this book will help to change your perspective. If you're already racially conscious, whatever your age, I hope you'll find some validation here. After all, anti-racism is for everyone.

I want to stress that my particular version of anti-racism is not the only version, nor may it be the *right* version at all. I simply want to share what I have come to understand in the hopes that it might be helpful to others. I fear that sometimes today, we become far too focused on *who's* right and *who's* wrong, even among social justice advocates. Holding each other accountable is important, but when we work to divide ourselves, it is only ourselves whom we conquer. Our time would be better spent in striving to understand *what* is most right and wrong with our society and getting on with the important work of uniting to *do* right; that is, fighting the racism that stays killing us regardless of our divided attention.

Today, I hesitate to watch recordings of police killings. For years I suffered flashbacks of Castile's killing, of the voice of Reynolds's daughter in the backseat. Considering that I wasn't physically there for the incident, it's hard to explain the post-traumatic stress that witnessing it on video gave me. But history has shown us that racism and colonialism cross borders with brazen ease and entitlement. Anti-Blackness stretches like a suffocating blanket from Europe to Africa, from Africa to the Caribbean, from the Caribbean to Canada and the U.S.A., and well beyond. It has been held within people's minds, carried on their slave ships, transmitted through their words and violence, all without a care in the world for precise geography. And so on a spiritual level, I *was* there for Philando Castile's killing; my Blackness, which is Castile's Blackness, which is Reynolds's Blackness, which is her daughter's Blackness, was there. The harrowing reality is that Castile could have been me, or any Black person.

At the time of writing, my own daughter is four years old. And she's a luminary. The thought of her having to learn about Castile's shooting death, let alone witness one like it, haunts me. She and my warm and sensitive 2-year-old son (himself a young sage) are among the main reasons I'm writing this book. Because I dream that their world and your world will be better, and a little less cruel and unjust than mine.

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I fought hard to emerge from my state of immobility in 2016 because I realized I may have been hiding from the truth, that racism is a real and present danger still, one that restricts our movements, our knowledge, our words, our happiness, our dreams, our futures, and our breathing. Racism threatens our *lives*. Meanwhile, there are lots of things that can stifle our action in fighting this threat: our social division, our fear of dying, our collective trauma, our exhaustion, or even our numbness to it all. Whatever the cause, when we are able to muster the strength and the courage, we must come together bravely to face our future and make sure that it is bright. When we can do that, we will do as the incomparable James Baldwin encouraged. We will “cease fleeing from reality and begin to change it.” *That’s* revolution, family.

How might we achieve that, you ask? Well, let’s talk about it.