



2017

The Manmade Construct of Race

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Recommended Citation

Zsorey, Tatum '21, "The Manmade Construct of Race" (2017). *First-Year Summer Reading Program Essay Contest*. 9.

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The Manmade Construct of Race by Tatum Zsorey

From slavery to the Holocaust to imperialism, racism has been the backbone of movements that seek to dominate or eliminate groups of people seen as genetically and morally inferior. Former Stanford professor, George M. Fredrickson, has traced racism back to the 13th century in his essay “The Historical Origins and Development of Racism” with the identification of those of the Jewish faith as devil worshippers and witches. As time has passed, racism has been manipulated to assume multiple forms in the quest to suppress all groups seen as unfavorably different, from those with darker skin colors, to those with different cultures or different religions. These ever altering forms of racism have led up to and continued beyond Ta-Nehisi Coates’ Baltimore upbringing where he noticed at a young age that his life and his spirit were in danger of being swallowed by the racist attitudes embedded into the history and culture of the United States. Throughout *Between the World and Me*, Coates challenged me to view race, racism, and their history in a bold new light, from both a world perspective and in their entrenchment in the traditional notions of the American Dream, in a way that has allowed me to look beyond myself and into the eyes of a man who has experienced the debilitation and fear of targeted racism.

“Race is the child of racism, not the father”. The quote appears fairly uncomplicated, yet in reality contains psychological, philosophical, and historical roots that stretch much deeper than the simplicity of the words. Coates challenges readers to look beyond the color of their skins, the way they celebrate, and the way they practice their religions. Instead, he urges readers to view all of humanity as one race: the human race. The categories of race are not a natural part of the world, but rather are manmade concepts that have their roots in the simple human desire to

categorize and classify differences observed so as to determine what is and isn't dangerous. Racism exists because humans desire to affirm their dominance and superiority, even if it is superiority over fellow humans. The desire for unadulterated power over a group of people, justified on the grounds of a belief in cultural and moral superiority, has led to the existence of race. The age old desire for dominance has seeped into the pores of most modern day societies, creating and fueling stereotypes that generate conscious and subconscious categorization, fear, and assault. This conscious and subconscious fear that exists in almost all is, therefore, a result not of the differences between cultures, but rather the desire to exacerbate such differences. By approaching race as the product of intentional persecution of differences, Coates offers a new way in which to view the history of racism from the 13th century persecution of Jews as devil worshippers to the modern day persecution of inner-city black men as thugs and criminals. Even the most enlightened can struggle and feel offended in classifying themselves or others as Black, Hispanic, Asian, etc. given that these categories are the result of discrimination and persecution that has existed since the Middle Ages.

Although it was difficult for me to completely agree with all of Coates' assertions, his views have opened a new path for me to understand both my own and other's perspectives. My views of my own racial identity have largely been shaped by what I have learned in school and what I have seen in the news and through social media sites. At a young age I did not notice differences between myself and classmates of different backgrounds, rather these difference became clearer through my education on events such as the American Civil War and Second

World War. Movements such as Black Lives Matter have further opened my eyes to the race wars that are still being fought in America, as well as the visible and discreet persecution that exists from the political to social arenas. Even though my awareness of those of different skin colors and cultures has grown, it has allowed an avenue for me to respect such differences and has fueled my desire to end the classification of people based on a system of historic tyranny and persecution. It would be easy for me as a Caucasian to recognize discrimination against Black, Hispanics, Asians, etc., yet write it off as an established part of society, or even hide behind the arguments of equality through the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments, or Civil Rights Acts of 1964 and 1965. Yet in choosing to view myself as Coates does, through my humanness, I recognize that race exists because of racism, and can continue to work towards altering the conscious and subconscious persecution that has existed throughout history.