

## Race: A Social Construct Created for the Sake of Justification

Race is a very complicated and nuanced concept ingrained deeply into the consciousness of American society, a result of America's bloody and gruesome history of oppression and exploitation towards people of color. What is race? How did the concept arise? Who has the authority to define it? What are its boundaries? How does race factor into privilege and life in society? These questions are constantly a point of debate throughout the years between many people and professions, including historians, lawyers, archaeologists, politicians, and more.

Although the existence of skin color is inarguable, the concept of race was created, along with its prominence in society. It is commonly said that babies are not born recognizing race, but are taught racist behaviors and ideologies. Society is the same; race did not just happen to become an integral part of classification for no reason, and the color of people's skin does not inherently mean they embody a certain set of characteristics. In order to discover the origins of race, analyzing artwork can help provide insight into the mentalities of the artists at their time of living, and in extension, insight into widespread beliefs of society at that time. Artwork of a medieval crusade scene from the 11<sup>th</sup> through 13<sup>th</sup> century depicts a battle between Western Christians and Eastern Muslims, in which the only identification to distinguish differences in religion was the shape of their swords and shields. There was no difference in skin color or facial features, exhibiting a lack of importance placed on race or even differences in physical attributes during that time period. This is further supported through Adoration of the Magi. Artists throughout the centuries created their own renditions of the three Magi; in a 6<sup>th</sup> century depiction, the differences in the Magi were purely their ages. However, Cosimo Tura's 14<sup>th</sup> century depiction includes one distinctly darker Magi. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century onwards, this third, darker Magi starts taking on different characteristics, appearing with a Native American-like

feathered headdress in one or with feminine aspects in another, representing other marginalized or oppressed communities. Skin color appearing in artwork around the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> century suggests that the concept of racial differences gained prominence around that time.

Since the concept of race was created, analyzing this time period in relation to events regarding America provides insight to why it became so entrenched within our society. Race is and has constantly been used as a tool to “justify structures of inequality, differential treatment, subordinate status, and in some cases, violent conflict and war”, as well as “amalgamate and homogenize those who do the classifying.”<sup>1</sup> This proves how race was used as a tool to oppress victims, while being very effective in silencing opposition within the oppressor’s community. In the beginning of America’s history, this homogenization of European colonizers created the idea of white supremacy, which we see perpetuated in many conflicts throughout the centuries. Utilizing race and idea of white supremacy, people in power crafted the narrative of the pristine myth, which is the prevailing notion that indigenous groups in America were small, isolated, and uncivilized at the time of the Europeans’ initial contact,<sup>2</sup> rather than thriving civilizations of many people and cultures. However, this is simply untrue and dehumanizing to the Native Americans. This is proved through the study of corn, a high-maintenance crop requiring proper irrigation and care only possible with a large amount of people and systems correlating to organization and government. Many civilizations thrived in America with a culture built around corn, beginning with the Mayans, then cycling through Olmec, Toltec, and Aztec civilizations, which even paralleled the Greek and Roman empires cherished in American history classes. Further north, evidence of corn-based civilizations appeared, sustaining Native American tribes

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<sup>1</sup> Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation*, 105.

<sup>2</sup> Mann, “1491”.

of Hohoka, Anasazi, Navajos, Cherokee, and more, which all had established governments.<sup>3</sup> However, this information directly contradicts the pristine myth's claims towards "small amounts" and "uncivilized" people in America, so what caused this disparity? Disease carried over by European colonizers. Smallpox swept through around 1525, typhus in 1546, diphtheria in 1614, and measles in 1618, wiping out millions of Native Americans and civilizations. The Europeans understood these "old world" infections and diseases, but did not do anything to help. They "downplay[ed] theories of contagion and [let] epidemic-stricken Indian villages struggle on their own,"<sup>4</sup> proof of either malicious intent to conquer and steal land for the purpose of capitalism, the extent of which they used race to dehumanize Native Americans, or both.

Another huge part of American history contributing to racial inequalities today is slavery. Black people were largely dehumanized, lives reduced to be as unimportant as objects, their sole purpose to be sold as property and carry out labor; race and physical differences was a key factor which framed white peoples' view and treatment of black people. "When [black women] stoop at their common work of weeding, [their breasts] hang almost to the ground, that at a distance, you would think they had six legs... [which] symbolized their sole utility- their ability to produce both crops and other laborers."<sup>5</sup> This commentary by Ligon reveals the way white slave-owners justified their actions by simultaneously painting themselves as higher beings while dehumanizing black people and sexualizing black women. With this flawed lens of race, the white slave owners reduced real human beings to monsters and vehicles for reproduction. This and the pristine myth used the concept of race to perpetuate beautiful lies for white people to

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<sup>3</sup> Dunbar-Ortiz, *An indigenous Peoples' History*, 18-31.

<sup>4</sup> Chaplin, *Anglo-American Frontier*, 159.

<sup>5</sup> Morgan, "Some Could Suckle", 168.

ignore the brutal and disgusting truth, allowing Americans to unquestioningly, comfortably, and ignorantly live in a land stolen through genocide and made wealthy through slavery.

It is hard to imagine how a society could progress to this state, but many factors contributed that mere concept of race could excuse such inhumane actions. Aside from the bias ingrained in American society resulting from white men constantly in power, “social Darwinist currents... sometimes inadvertently but often by intention contribute[d] to the racist hysteria of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.”<sup>6</sup> Science is a complex subject that is hard to explore without bias, but with limited information, confirmation bias, and the continued desire for power and control, it is really easy for white scientists to twist the truth to fit their narrative. Audrey Smedley described this “scientific racialism” with five key characteristics. One, “human groups [are] ‘discrete and biotic entities’ measured by physical and behavioral variations”; two, “inegalitarian ethos... required hierarchical ordering of human types”; three, there was a “belief that outer physical characteristics were but markers of inner intellectual, moral, or temperamental qualities”; four, “these qualities were heritable”; and five, those “imputed differences, believed fixed and unalterable, could never be bridged or transcended”.<sup>7</sup> Simply put, science was twisted to support the idea that race inherently separated people into hierarchies that could not be bridged due to physical differences, and that really contributed to the wrongful validation of racial stereotyping.

The greatest factor that pushed the entrenchment of race was its solidification into governmental structures through laws. Jim Crow laws, Asian exclusion laws, immigration laws, redlining, and voter laws all contributed to hindering racial minority groups, and although most of these laws have been overturned due to decades and centuries of struggle, protests, and even

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<sup>6</sup> Omi and Winant, *Racial Formations*, 5.

<sup>7</sup> Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color*, 32.

war, the effects are long-lasting and deep within the respective communities. The “distribution of economic resources, patterns of cultural consumption, and organization of residential space are all social processes in which race operates as a fundamental organizing principle of inequality and difference.”<sup>8</sup> There is a lack of health care access, higher incarceration rates, and even in the recession of 2008, higher rates of higher loan for people of color. These racial issues are “so deeply rooted in the nation that just reducing them ‘moderately’ may have consequences,” and inadequate civil rights measures have even “served to ratify and reinvigorate the underlying racial regime.”<sup>9</sup> This means that true change within America cannot be little band-aids piled up, because those can have adverse effects. Even now, in modern times, people like to claim that racism doesn’t exist, or America is now “color blind”, especially if a black man could become president, but statistics still show disparities that need to be addressed. To uproot the fundamentally racist foundation that America was built on requires structural change and the destruction of the white supremacy mindset completely, which must start with re-education and the provision of resources to communities that have been handicapped through years of oppression. Only then can our society start moving past these injustices and healing these wounds that have been inflicted on people of color in America for centuries.

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<sup>8</sup> Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation*, 2.

<sup>9</sup> Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation*, 8.

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