

Overvalued and Under Defined;
The Essentialism of Race in Regards to Identity

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Racial Essentialism

I once believed I couldn't imagine a society where race wasn't a focal point but upon further thought, I've come to acknowledge that race is not essential as a concept and is not regarded with the same value in every society as it is in the U.S. During my time in Ghana, I became aware of how different my views and opinions regarding race and racism differed from those around me who had never experienced racism the way that African-Americans have experienced it. To many of my Ghanaian peers, racism couldn't be real, because to them, race wasn't important enough to cause such divisions. In reflection of my time in Ghana, I have become aware that I displayed my ethnocentrism by believing that every society experienced a racialized existence, and race played the instrumental and often defining role in an individual's daily life, as it does to many Americans.

Many of my Ghanaian peers did not give any thought to their racial identity. Despite being aware of what race was, it simply was not important to them, but it was to me and my fellow Americans who often brought up race. As an American, the concept of race has played such an instrumental role in our lives that we found ourselves using it as an identifier, even when no one around us was. To wit, I identify as African-American. My identity is hinged on a hyphenate, I have never identified as just "American". This became apparent as I spent more time around my Ghanaian peers. Another thing I became aware of during my time in Ghana was the difference in how I identified myself versus how those around me identified me. The race I identified myself with was no longer valid in the eyes of others. I have always been aware of myself as "Black" because, in comparison to those around me, that's what term "naturally" fits me best. I could go even further to consider myself a "Black American" as I was born in the US. However, in Ghana,

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many people referred to me as white or American. In the local language, Twi, I was referred to as “Obruni” which directly translates to, “person from across the sea” but was used to categorize me as a white person. The reason for this shift is the shift in the community I’m in. When in a room of other Americans, it seems we are inclined to separate people by race as we have been conditioned to do so [by years and years of conditioning by mainstream media]. However, in Ghana, where everybody is the same “race” (black by my American standards), that form of categorization is meaningless. Rather, they focus on ethnic and national identity. This would explain why I was seen by my American identity, rather than the racialized one I have familiarized myself with. In one discussion with a peer of mine, she mentioned that they didn’t see other Africans (Nigerians, Togolese, Ivorians, etc.) as tourists because they were all African or even West African but ultimately, still African. This conversation gave me insight into how her categorization process for people worked and how it differed from mine. It would be ignorant of me to say that Ghanaians have no concept of race at all. As mentioned before, there is a clear awareness of the concept but its usage and application differs. In this project I aim to prove that race, ethnicity, and nationality are concepts that are regarded and valued differently in many different communities, and I will do that by dissecting the role of these concepts in the respective communities I discuss.

The ability to compare and contrast the importance of race in the two countries gave me a non-ethnocentric perspective on the role of race and racism within society. With this additional perspective, I was able to reevaluate the essentialism of race. Is race essential? The difficulty I found myself having with answering this question is the oversimplification of it. I acknowledge that race can’t be discussed without mentioning the historical, social, economic, and political

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effect it has had in the U.S and racism, in arguing that race is not essential, I fear that I am downplaying the important role that race has played in the lives of many especially when too many examples of that make the nightly news. I have come to realize that to recognize and acknowledge that race is not essential does not diminish the potency of its reality or its consequences. Before undertaking this project, I likened the saying that “race isn’t essential” to those who consider themselves “colorblind”. Rather than showing a willingness to acknowledge the different races and the different experiences people have had because of their races, people who claim to be colorblind turn a blind eye to racial inequality and it is a way to ignore any privileges associated with being white and downfalls associated with being black. It’s a kind of willful ignorance and a play on respectability politics. In saying that race is not essential, I am not saying that people should be blind to the differences of others, but rather that differences can be acknowledged with varying lenses and that we examine rather than ignore the assumptions that arise as a result of these moments. Additionally, though race is not essential, due to the role it plays in individual’s lives it is very real. It materializes itself in the communities that bond over sharing a racial identity and culture, as well as those who are treated differently due to their racial identity.

I understand the hesitation to label race as nonessential is important but challenging for many. This is because we’ve been conditioned to view it as all-important and necessary in defining ourselves. In this view, race over determines all other attributes or markers of identification. In one class I learned that racism came before race in the U.S. This is to say that a division of people was needed in order to create a social hierarchy, thus race was born, placing white people at the top and black people at the bottom (Smedley). This shows that race is in part

a socially constructed concept. It is not grounded in any fact and has been groomed to exist and play the role that it does in the US and ultimately gives much power to a dominant class as they use various mediums to define the word. The implementation of race throughout colonial history explains the dichotomy between its importance in the U.S. and throughout the world. While many non-Western countries know what race is, they have not all gone through the same process of racialization (the process of ascribing racial or ethnic identities to people who don't identify themselves the same way) that Western countries have gone through.

If race is looked at objectively, as an identifier it would not have played the role that it has. Instead of acknowledging somebody's race and building a perception of them based on that, it could have been as simple as acknowledging that somebody has brown hair, expressing the phenotype only, lacking any subtext or implication. However, that is not the way race is used. When considering race as a nonscientific identifier based on perception, it is not essential.

We categorize ourselves because one way that communities are formed is through commonalities. There will always be an identifier and that can be used to connect and/or divide people. As mentioned before, in Ghana, the Ghanaians tended to group themselves based on their ethnic or religious identity. Non-Africans were categorized by their national identities. People also choose to categorize and group themselves based on religion, income, gender, and many other factors. Some people use differences as a power play and weaponize them. This is the process that race has gone through in the US. Instead of simply being an adjective or physical description, race was utilized as a tool to create, implement and support a social hierarchy and it has rooted itself as an identifier people consider necessary to categorize and identify themselves.

As it is a social construct, the idea of race is fluid, meaning that it is an idea that has different applications regionally or geographically. Although outwardly one's skin color remains the same, people's relationship with the concept *and their perception of it* varies from person to person. In North America, where people come from all over the world, race defines the likelihood of success and accessibility to resources. Historically, American race relations divide people by what their perceived race is. The issue with this, however, is that sometimes people's perceived identity is not aligned with what they ethnically identify themselves as. I've mentioned my experience with culture shock and being categorized differently than how I view myself when going to Ghana, but I imagine the shift from a non-racially fixated society to one where it holds the importance that it does in the US is more of a shock. Few of my Ghanaian friends have been to Western countries, but those who did expressed their shock with the existence of racism and their experiences with racism. The shift from not having to interact with one's race to having one's perceived race be the focal point of their identity was difficult for them. This transition also emphasizes the inability many have to form their own identity and have their chosen identifiers be what they are recognized as. Rather than being recognized as Ghanaian or Akan, they were seen as black, which is not the lens they used to view themselves. Additionally, they had to learn about what blackness is in a Western context and everything associated with blackness because it was a foreign concept to them.

Definitions and Applications

As briefly mentioned before, in relation to ethnicity and race (and other racial/cultural signifiers), the aspects of one's identity that a person chooses to fixate on is largely dependent on the identity of those in their community. The reason for this is that people want to be identified in a way that connects them with those in their small community, while also distinguishing them from others. But in order to discuss this, I must look at why these concepts have become important features in identifying people and what the nature of these concepts are. I also intend to dissect what it means to belong to a community that identifies one way, and how that may affect an individual's view of the world. In order to do so, I will study race conflicts that have occurred throughout history and dissect what role the concept of race and its importance played within those conflicts, as well as its role in modern situations. The ultimate aim is to understand the standalone concept of race and discuss its essentialism, its nature, and how it's become so important in identifying oneself and others. However, in order to view the application of these concepts, I must first define them.

Identity is a complex and fluid concept, yet it is invaluable to many people and used as a fixture for one to build their sense of self. There are many aspects to an individual's identity, and though these concepts (race, gender, etc) can be distinct, they also interplay a lot and shape a person's sense of self and experiences. Some concepts that can interplay with each other are that of race, nationality, and ethnicity, all of which will be discussed in this paper. To some people, the three are intrinsically tied and difficult to distinguish from each other, and to others, they are different enough to be standalone concepts. These three concepts attach themselves to a person and describe an aspect of their identity at varying levels and the value of these concepts also

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varies from person to person. The US Census' officially recognizes five races; White American, Black/African American, Native American, Asian American, and Pacific Islander. This recognition of five racial identities does not acknowledge Hispanic as a racial identity, though many socially consider it as a racial group. This alone serves to highlight the abstractness of race. For this paper, I will be using the US census recognized races as well as Hispanic though it is not recognized by the census. I will attempt to find a cohesive answer to what the nature of these concepts are and see how the importance attributed to these concepts affect and shape an individual's life. However, as mentioned before these concepts are all very fluid and loosely defined, and as we will see in the coming sections, they interplay with each other and affect people's self-perceived and viewed identity differently and on a case by case basis.

Though many people already have a sense of the aforementioned concepts, the nature of these concepts is still unclear. What are nationality, race, and ethnicity, and how are they different from each other or the same is the first question to be asked if one is to study anything in relation to these concepts. I personally believe the easiest concept to dissect is the concept of nationality. So, what is the nature of nationality? The simplest way to describe nationality is to say it means to belong to a nation. One can go further and say that it is to belong to a nation and abide by the laws of that nation in exchange for protection under these laws. It appears to be a simple concept, yet it can be easily complicated. How does one go about belonging to a nation? One can live in a nation but not abide by the laws or be considered a citizen. Many people base their nationality on where they are born, yet not every nation recognizes birthright citizenship. Additionally, many people have dual citizenship, showing they belong to more than one nation, but can a person be mixed nationally the way they can be mixed racially? I do believe it is

possible for a person to be influenced by many nations and consider themselves multi-national. However, this still leaves the question of whether citizenship is the only way to attribute a person to a nation. As we will see in the later discussed Haiti and The Dominican Republic conflict, the concept of nationality is also fluid, however, to simplify it I will describe it as belonging to a nation in whatever way the individual describes belonging; whether it means just by living there or by speaking the native language of a nation. This would mean, like the other concepts I will discuss, the concept of nationality is fluid or socially constructed or defined by a series of rules or ideas that are subject to change or shift.

Two concepts that many believe are intrinsically connected are that of ethnicity and race. Many people don't create a distinction between the two and believe they are the same. This is a factual misconception. While the concepts can be connected, they often are not the same. Using the five races given by the U.S. Consensus, it is not possible to place everybody into one of these categories ethnically. In doing so, one would be overriding any individuality shown amongst different cultural groups. For example, Hispanics are not represented in the five categories mentioned; essentially erasing them from being recognized. The term most appropriate to describe the act of erasing a group and the marrying of race and ethnicity is the act of being "difference blind". This term was introduced to me through Charles Taylors' *The Politics of Recognition* in which Taylor discusses how to make equality achievable amongst many other things such as how one comes to recognize themselves as a reflection of how others recognize themselves. This term was being used in his discussion about finding a middle ground between all groups to base equality on, but in doing so not every group will be satisfied because this "middle ground" will likely favor the dominant groups and many groups will be unseen and

unheard in this compromise. Though Taylor was speaking in a political context, this idea can also apply to the erasure of ethnic identity in order to favor racial identity. Because ethnicity focuses on an individual's culture, religion, language, as well as other details, it cannot be interchangeable with race which is determined differently. So, now that I have explained why race and ethnicity must be separated and distinguished from each other I must explain exactly what ethnicity is.

Ethnicity describes the culture a person was raised in. This can include but is not limited to; language, religion, dialect, history, or even minor things such as similar foods. Ethnic groups are smaller than racial groups because many ethnic groups can fit into one racial group. For example, in Ghana, everybody is nationally Ghanain and racially black, yet there are over 100 ethnic groups. From region to region different languages are spoken, different holidays are celebrated, and different foods are eaten. There are even instances where the culture of one group to another is more similar across the border than within one country. For example; in the Volta Region that borders Southern Togo, Ewe is the predominant language spoken and it's also spoken by those near the border in Southern Togo. However, if one were to drive 4 hours to Accra they would hear English and Twi, likely the only people who would speak Ewe are those who have moved to Accra from Volta Region. This is just an example of how different groups can be separated regionally but what exactly separates the Ewe speaking Ewe's and the Twi speaking Asante people of Accra and Kumasi? As mentioned before, ethnic groups are made when people are connected through a culture. In this case, the language separates people as well as their religious practices and though there may be cultural overlaps, the two groups consider themselves separate unities from each other, despite being the same race, and that is because the

most important aspect of their identity is their ethnic grouping, which is likened to their cultural heritage.

With a definition I consider satisfactory to describe ethnicity, I can move onto the vaguest, yet often most highly regarded (In the U.S) concept; race. As mentioned before, the U.S Consensus officially recognizes five races based on shared physical qualities. It can also be argued that race is determined by people's ancestral origins. To exemplify this in the simplest way that would mean those with African ancestry are black, those with European are white, those with Asian ancestry are Asian, etc. However, race has taken more of a social connotation and physical connotation rather than any factual ancestral importance. The first reason race cannot be based on factual DNA alone is because most people (at least in the US) don't know where their family is originally from due to many external factors such as the slave trade and many families have lived in America for many generations. Additionally, as time passes more families become interracial so many people do not belong to just one race.

In addition to being unable to identify the races on DNA alone, physical features aren't always enough to identify somebody racially. As mentioned before, many people are mixed and racially ambiguous so it is difficult to physically decipher what race(s) they belong to. Another difficulty with dividing people physically is the vague qualifications for each race. What shade of brown does somebody have to be considered black? What physical qualities determine if somebody is Asian and is it necessary to separate Eastern and Southern Asians? Because these questions have no universally agreed upon answers, race cannot be determined physically.

The last method I introduced is race as a social concept. Again, this raises questions as to how exactly each race can be identified and what are the repercussions to identifying somebody

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in a particular way or being identified in a particular way? How exactly is one perceived to be black? These notions are very problematic currently and they ultimately lead to stereotyping as well as limiting people based on their race. Because none of these concepts work alone to define race, I believe all three play a role in defining race. These concepts and their ambiguities have led to many conflicts throughout world history. To further investigate the above concepts I will be observing the roles they play in historical context.

Kwame Anthony Appiah's *The Lies That Bind: Rethinking Identity* intrigued me in its similarity and relevance in my topic. The first thing that intrigued me about Appiah's piece was the use of the question, "What are you?" This is a question I initially planned to base my paper on because the response possibilities are endless. People can respond with any aspect of their identity; gender, race, class, nationality (these are the identifiers Appiah recognizes). It is common practice to ask the question, "What are you?" to people in many instances and it's seen as casual conversation, but what exactly is one asking when they ask that question. Additionally, what are they hoping to gain or learn upon hearing the answer? The answer to that question can be anything from race, nationality, sexuality, or gender, so the context is important to find the appropriate way to answer, but this isn't always the case. The preceding conversation could have revolved around race or not, but I find that it is American's natural instinct to answer that question with a descriptor of their race/ethnicity (thought this could be a projection). But again, how is somebody supposed to answer this vague question and what exactly does the answer say about a person.

Let's say the person responds that they are black. You now know that they possess African ancestry, but you don't know how far that ancestry lies or where, and this knowledge is

also more of an assumption than a fact. You know that they identify with that group, but the title black itself does not hold any information about the person. It would be similar is the person said they were white, you would know they had European ancestry, and nothing more. These are the only things you can know about a person once becoming aware of their race, but “knowledge” gained after learning somebody’s race is inferred or assumed?

So if you’re not gaining any information from this question, why ask it? It can be assumed that people’s identity is important to them but why, and how do they form these identities. As expressed in Charles Taylor’s *The Politics of Recognition*, people form their identity in contrast to others. As such, the aspect of identity a person fixates on is naturally based on the perceived identity of those around them. Once a person has defined their own identity, they form a group with others who they believe they have common interests with. Taylor uses the example of Anglophone Quebec vs Francophone Quebec to view how groups are formed based on their similarities/differences. I also agreed with Appiah’s usage of the term “social shared identities” because, in my opinion, identity is fluid and ever-changing as a person’s social status or engagement with those around them changes.

Another thing Appiah introduced was an example of an identity being formed in contrast to others in, “The Four Day Old Tribe” case study. “The Four Day Old Tribe” specifically displays how we create our identities in contrast to others. This study follows a group of ten year old boys from similar backgrounds who are at a summer camp and after a week of being there, they discover there is another group of boys. This causes each group to distinguish themselves as “The Eagles” and “The Rattlers” respectively, where prior to the discovery of the other group they remained unlabeled. Once each group is formed they also began to look and talk down to

the opposing group. This study gives a look into the forming of “in groups”, us and those like us, and “out groups”, the others. The boys only chose to form a group and create a group identity, once they had something to contrast and a group that they were not a part of. Though these categorizations are outside of any racial context, the process is similar. A person is only able to identify themselves in contrast to those who are different from them. A black person is only able to know they are black when they are around a non-black person because their blackness stands out in a room of those different whereas it blends in and is seemingly insignificant in a room full of those who identify similarly.

As seen in “The Four Day Tribe” example, once each group was identified, they were given attributes to classify them and distinguish themselves. Aside from each group giving themselves a name, the groups began to stereotype the other with the Eagles calling the Rattlers bums and the Rattlers calling the Eagles sissies. This is the process of stereotyping. I once wrote, “By assessing what we believe somebody’s race is we also subconsciously begin to attribute qualities to that individual based on what their perceived race is, this is stereotyping. Stereotyping goes further than the qualities and characteristics we attach to others and can be self-imposed as well. These stereotypes have become so ingrained in our perceptions of ourselves that they have become second nature, and people use these classifications as justifications for their or others behaviors.” but did not expand on how the process of stereotyping begins or how it affects individuals.

The process of stereotyping happens after a group is formed and identified. Going back to the initial question, “What are you” I asserted that if a person responds with what race they are, they aren’t necessarily giving you any information that is useful in characterizing them as a

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person. Though you may not be getting any factual information, a person may be likely to infer characteristics based on the person's given race. Because stereotypes are judgments made about a group based on their (perceived) actions, it doesn't actually tell you anything about a person, because they're not necessarily grounded in truth or facts. Yet, despite that, many people treat stereotypes as grounds to understand a person. Instead of giving true information about a person or group, stereotypes serve to create a social order with a dominant group. This is an effect of the social hierarchy created and based on race.

Application of These Concepts in the Modern World

As I have tried my best to define race and ethnicity, I will now try to see what roles they play in the modern world. As mentioned before, to many the race and ethnicity are indistinguishable and go hand and hand, however, race fixates on the social and physical qualities of a person whereas ethnicity fixates on the national and cultural aspects, such as their religion and language(s) spoken. The term ethno racial accounts for both. In Ghana, a racially homogenous country, because everybody is the same race, black, there isn't a way to separate people based on racial identity. Therefore, they focus on their ethnic identities whether it be their native tribe, their native language, their native region, or the combination of all three. In a country where everybody belongs to a distinct ethnic group, there isn't a need for the concept of race. Because of this, many Ghanaians don't have a concept of "blackness", rather the term doesn't extend to mean anything more than their complexion.

In contrast to this, the United States of America is a racially diverse country. The United States Consensus only officially recognizes five racial categories including; White Americans, Black Americans, Native Americans, Asian Americans, and Pacific Islanders, and many people consider Latinos a racial group as well, though they are excluded from the US Consensus. Because there are so many easily distinguishable physical factors amongst each race, it is easy for Americans to focus on our racial identities and use that as a feature to categorize ourselves.

My belief is that certain aspects of our identity, such as race and ethnicity, can distinguish and separate people from each other. Because identity is fluid, a person may choose to fixate on what separates them from those around them or unifies them. When it comes to ethno racial identity a person is likely to choose to fixate on the aspect of their identity that likens them to

their immediate community that they are raised in despite this potentially separating them from the larger community. However, identity is fluid and the focal point for one's identity can change as their surroundings change. For example, in a room full of Ghanaians, I am identified as, "The American Girl" which separates me from my Ghanaian peers yet connects me to other Americans. However, in a room of Americans, I become, "The Black Girl" because a racial distinction is more easily identified in a racially diverse room. In example A, the ethnic identity is what has taken precedence because that is the easiest and quickest distinction to make, whereas in Example B, the racial identity is the focal point.

As one develops their identity, race is often involved and how people choose to identify themselves and those around them are highly influenced by their community. Upon seeing the difference in chosen focal points of identity in the US and Ghana, I became curious about how people become conscious of their race and how their community affects their decision to incorporate race as an important part of their identity. Through interviewing a couple of my peers I have found that it is easiest to become aware of your race when it is contrasted to another's. I was inspired by Baratunde Thurston's piece, "How Black Are You" where Thurston proceeds to ask his friends how black/white they are. Thurston's piece asserts that there is no correct way to be any race and the definitions of what each race should be like are very loose and at times, ridiculous. I wanted to build off of his dissection of the races but in a different way. Because of this, I asked those close to me when they first became aware of their racial identity (as assumed by others), and if that realization impacted how they viewed others as well as themselves. This was done to prove that becoming aware of our race does change our perspective and as our surroundings change, our perspective may change along with it.

The first person I interviewed was my friend Michelle Locke, who is from the small town of Red Hook, New York. When I asked her when she first realized she was white she said,

In the second grade. My town was full of conservatives but my best friend at the time was Puerto Rican. One day after a couple of boys had bullied her and kept calling her black she said, 'I'm not black my skin is brown' because to us we thought they meant her physical skin color. This was the first time I realized that we weren't the same color. Following this, she informed me that from that moment onward she would notice how she was treated differently from her friend. What Michelle was describing was the moment she realized she was white and had white privilege. Because Michelle lived in such a conservative town she suddenly became aware of how racist and prejudicial those around her were, though she was never on the receiving end of these prejudices. For Michelle, becoming aware of her race made her open her eyes to the treatment of people based on their racial background, showing her perception of the world did change. However, as Michelle lived in a predominantly white town, race did not become the focal point of her identity.

As Michelle was able to form her identity in a predominantly white town, she found herself forced to reassess her identity when she visited Benin, a francophone country in West Africa. Her racial identity was always a part of her but it never took precedence until it was what made her stand out in a crowd. This shift from a racially homogenous place that she conformed to, to one that she didn't highlight aspects of her identity that she was never forced to focus on such as her whiteness and her Americanness. This can be attributed to the fluidity of identity.

Some people say that they never become aware of their race so it is not an aspect of their identity. For example, Benjamin Graham who is from Buffalo, New York, said because he didn't grow up in an overtly racist town he did not grow up aware of his whiteness or that there were any differences in how different races were treated. At the risk of sounding like I am discrediting

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his account, I find this hard to believe. The sheer fact that when a person is filling out an official document they will most likely be required to give their race displays the inability to be unaware of your race. Because many people become aware of their race as a child they are ignorant to the racism that occurs around them but that in itself could have been white privilege taking its course. Benjamin was never forced to be aware of his race because his race never took precedence over his personhood. This shows that even within the US how race plays a different role in everybody's life and identity, but I wanted to focus on it on a more global and diverse scale.

One quote that has stuck with me since hearing it is “I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background.” Though this was a quotation of Glen Ligon in Claudia Rankine’s *Citizen*, the context of reading it in regards to Serena and Venus Williams inhabiting the all-white spaces of professional tennis resonated with me. I believe this quote summarizes the recognition of one’s own race in contrast to those around you.

The Role of Race in the Rwandan Genocide

One sentence that struck me in Appiah's *The Lies That Bind Rethinking Identity* was in his Colors chapter where he was discussing the concept of race and how it may be used as a means to divide people and have power over them. He related this phenomenon to the Europeans holding the Africans as slaves as well as the many genocides that have happened throughout world history.

“In the Armenian, Herero, and Rwandan genocides, the language of race played a terrifying role alongside the language of the nation. It is hard to think about race without mentioning racism, a word that was coined-somewhat belatedly, you might think, given this history-not to evoke hostile white attitudes to blacks but to describe the anti-Semitism of the German National Socialists.” (123)

This sentence struck me because I was eager for him to expand on this, specifically about the Rwandan Genocide. During my stay in Rwanda, a country now celebrating the 25th anniversary since the end of the genocide, I learned that the groups a part of the genocide were not ethnic groups, but groups of social class. With the exemption of the Twa, who were indigenous to the land, if an individual owned more than 10 cows they were Tutsi and if they owned less they were Hutu. Unlike with race and ethnicity, one could move amongst these classes and a Hutu could become a Tutsi and vice versa. This distinction between race and social class is important because it opposes the belief that a race war is what led to the start of the Rwandan genocide

Like many of the world's tragedies to date, the Rwandan genocide was caused by Europeans. It was not simply a “tribal war” as many like to see it as. When the Belgians invaded Rwanda, they deployed the divide and conquer strategy to rise to power. They favored the Tutsi who they believed appeared whiter and they began to classify people using minor physical classifications, such as skin color, height, and nose length, rather than genetic origins. There are many pictures taken of Belgian scientists measuring the noses of the Rwandans to look for

physical distinctions amongst the Tutsi and Hutu people. Additionally, the Belgians further divided the groups by supplying identity cards that listed the individual's given racial group. The reclassification of the Tutsi and the Hutus led to rising tensions as the Tutsi who made up less than 20% of the population were favored by the Belgians and gifted certain privileges, such as access to education. The disparities of the treatment led to rising tensions between the created racial groups that ultimately led to the start of the Genocide by extremist Hutu's.

The relevance of this occurrence is the creation of the concept of race in Rwanda. Race was not a naturally occurring phenomenon in the country prior to the arrival of the Belgians. Additionally, as mentioned before, the races were not classified by genetic origin but by physical features. However, because these classifications were made, they became an important part of people's identity. In this case, race was created and used as a means to divide people. This goes to show that race is a created concept (at least in this community), and just as easily as it can be created, it can be dismantled.

Something very memorable from my stay in Rwanda was the lack of attention drawn to my foreignness. As opposed to Ghana where I was often referred to as, "Oburoni", there seemed to be a lack of attention drawn to race and nationality. When I brought this up to my guide, Bukuru, he said because so much death and destruction was brought to Rwanda from dividing people on things like race, they no longer focused on it or thought it inappropriate to fixate on it. This is clear from the phrase, "We are all Rwandans" seen throughout the country. Also, the "I Am Rwandan" program which looks to eliminate the concept of nationality and unite those within the country as one.

Upon further research I discovered that this move was slightly controversial as many viewed it as an “ethnic cleansing” and felt that it ignored their people’s history. Initially I was confused because these movements have helped Rwanda become the rapidly developing country that it is now, however, once I likened it to people who “don’t see color” I was able to understand why many people are against the initiative. For many people, their racial identity is an important part of them. They feel that many things about them, including their history, characteristics, and choices can be rooted in their racial identity. So to be stripped of that can make people feel stripped of a part of themselves that they now need to reinvent.

Everybody has a way to classify themselves and others in terms of racial identity that reveals the dimensions of community, power, class and/or desire. Oftentimes, these classifications of racial identity expand far beyond a person’s race. By assessing what we believe somebody’s race is we also subconsciously begin to attribute qualities to that individual based on what their perceived race is, this is stereotyping. Stereotyping goes further than the qualities and characteristics we attach to others and can be self-imposed as well. These stereotypes have become so ingrained in our perceptions of ourselves that they have become second nature, and people use these classifications as justifications for their or others’ behaviors. Imagine a scenario where two black friends are discussing their weekend plans and one friend suggests camping. Instead of simply turning down the request the response could be something along the lines of. “Girl, that’s white people stuff. You know black people don’t go camping.” Statements such as these are normalized, because it’s not necessarily insulting, especially as it is said by a black person, but to what extent is it limiting? If the individual believes camping is a “white person

thing” and let that be a reason they choose not to pursue it, they are limiting themselves because of self-imposed attributes to their race.

Things like that example make race seem as though it can be a crutch to some. People can use it to explain their faults, highlight their achievements, and many more things. As of now, there are many whose race plays an important role in their identity and takes the focal point of their identity, who they are, and what they do. Racial identity is so important to people that when a black person says they want to be acknowledged outside of their race, they can often be met with disbelief from their black peers. For example, Langston Hughes wrote, “ I am ashamed for the black poet who says, 'I want to be a poet, not a negro poet', as though his own racial world were not as interesting as any other world." in regards to Countee Cullen. But why is it such a bad thing to not want your race to be your defining factor, especially considering all of the stereotypes and connotations attached to each race? Rather than denying one’s race, they could simply not want it to be their defining factor. Cullen didn’t want his poetry to center around his race because that’s not all there is to him. To what extent do people force others to fixate on their racial identity when they don’t personally feel attached to the concept of race.

Race as a concept is something that has united people while also historically used to divide people and maintain wealth. It was shown earlier how the concept of race served to divide the Hutu and Tutsi people of Rwanda, ultimately leading to the genocide of the Tutsi and the Twa, but how has race united others? Beverly Daniel Tatum’s *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria; And Other Conversations About Race* highlights the need to be a part of a group. When an individual becomes aware of their racial identity they are becoming aware of what group they are a part of. As briefly mentioned before, they are a part of the group

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because they seemingly share a history, physical characteristics, as well as personal traits. For example, as a blanket statement, to be black means to have an African ancestor. But, you can further that to say to be black means to have an African ancestor, brown skin, and curly hair. You can go even further to say to be black means to possess the aforementioned characteristics, talk in AAVE, and like rap and hip hop. The reason there are so many disparities among the definitions of what it means to be black is that there is no right way to be black because blackness is an abstract concept.

Despite the vagueness in the definition of blackness and what it means to be black, the shared concept of blackness has united many and allowed individuals to seek solace in those they consider to be like them. In the movie, "Get Out" the main character, Chris, is comforted by seeing the black staff at his white girlfriend's all-white farmhouse because he is now aware that he is not the only black person around. This realization allows him to feel more comfortable in a room where he believes there is a person who shares his race and ultimately some of his characteristics and background. This act, of finding comfort in the only other black person in a room is a widely practiced and recognized phenomenon. But, why? It can be assumed that we find kinship with those that are familiar to us and this drives us to seek those like us in hopes that this familiarity will bring us comfort.

The Role of Race in The Dominican Republic and Haiti Conflict

In an earlier section I wrote, "The United States Consensus only officially recognizes five racial categories including; White Americans, Black Americans, Native Americans, Asian Americans, and Pacific Islanders, and many people consider Latinos a racial group as well. Because there are so many easily distinguishable physical factors amongst each race, it is easy for Americans to focus on our racial identities and use that as a feature to categorize ourselves." While reflecting on this statement I was intrigued by where the Latinx and other communities that don't fit into the above five categories fit, not only within the context of the United States but also the context of their home countries.

While speaking to Yamel Garcia, an Afro-Dominican identifying peer of mine about this, the discussion of race conflicts was brought up. I was introduced to the race conflicts on Hispaniola, which is an island shared by Haiti and The Dominican Republic. As I was completely unaware of this conflict, Yamel shared her personal accounts and teachings to me and when she likened the Dominican administration to the current American administration, my interest was piqued. Upon further inspection, I can see the parallels between the two Nations, in regards to the anti-immigration policies, but what I found most intriguing were some of the anti-black regimes disguised as anti-Haitian regimes.

As mentioned before, Hispaniola is an island in North America that is home to Haiti and The Dominican Republic. Despite the sharing of the island, the two countries are very distinct from each other, Haiti being largely Francophone, and The Dominican Republic being largely Hispanophone. The French became colonial powers of the region of Haiti in 1697 and the population of black slaves was 8x that of the territory now known as the Dominican Republic.

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After a revolution on the francophone territory, Haiti declared independence in 1804 and was the sovereign black republic. Both countries continued to struggle with their political regimes, the Haitians had control of the Dominican Republic for 22 years, and the economic gap between the two widened as Haiti was forced to pay France a sum to gain diplomatic recognition as well as many other reasons.

In 1915, in order to escape this poverty, tens of thousands of Haitians migrated to the DR to work in sugar cane plantations as well as construction sites. In 1937 Rafael Trujillo, the dictator at the time encouraged an ethnic cleansing and the genocide of the Haitians residing in the DR and this was one of the beginnings of the anti-Haitian regime. The Dominican Constitution allows for Birthright citizenship, but in 2013 the Constitutional Court of the Dominican Republic made a law that revoked the citizenship of the children of unauthorized migrants born in the DR since 1929. This law led to many Dominican born Haitians being deported and becoming stateless.

The concept of race, ethnicity, and nationality play a large role in these conflicts, particularly the supposed flexibility of the mentioned terms as well as the nature/meaning of them. It brings to question the nature of being Haitian or Dominican. To begin with, what does it mean to be Dominican or Haitian? One major issue of this conflict is the issuing of national identity. According to the original constitution of the Dominican Republic, everybody born there who was given a birth certificate from the civil registry was granted citizenship (as many other countries do). In accordance with this constitution, anybody born in the DR is nationally Dominican, regardless of where their ancestry may lie. To retract this citizenship is to create a subgroup of people who are stateless and belong nowhere. Being stateless highlights the

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importance of belonging to a Nation in the first place, and the privilege that legal belonging awards each individual.

It is clear that race plays a vital role in the conflict between the two countries. Basing my conception of race on the aforementioned U.S. consensus, neither Haitian or Dominican are races. Due to the mixing of the European Colonists, Indigenous people, and Africans (both freed and slaves), there are many different races in Hispaniola, as well as many people who are mixed race. What makes the two countries distinct from each other is the mass import of African slaves to Haitian ports led to Haiti being predominantly black (70%) as opposed to the 73% mixed people of the DR (according to the 2015 US census). Under Trujillo's regime, ethnic cleansing was proposed, this essentially sought to remove "blackness" from the DR, thus the anti- Haitian regime was furthered. What muddles this anti-Haitian regime is the lack of definitive racial ties to each group.

There are Dominicans with black skin. And there are Haitians with white skin. I don't understand why they don't hold everyone to the same standard. Many Dominicans walk around without their documents, and if you have no documents on you, how do you prove your nationality? - Givena Reyes (PBS Documentary)

If you consider neither Dominican or Haitian as racial groups, there is no one way to categorize them racially which is why the anti-black regime of the DR was codified as an anti-Haitian regime. I believe the most appropriate title to these aspects of identity are ethnicities. Meaning, there were people who may have been ethnically Haitian, yet nationally Dominican. As these individuals were born in the DR, many of them had no ties to Haiti. This brings about the topic of multiculturalism. Many Haitians born in the DR lived in a community with other Haitians, yet being in the DR there are many cultural influences from the Dominicans so that can lead to

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multi-ethnic identities within the community. This conflict highlights the fluidity of the concepts I have discussed. A concept people felt secure in, their national identity, was stripped from them.

Another notable thing about this concept is the usage of race amongst the Haitians/Dominicans versus the Census. Under the U.S. Census, the Latinx community is not regarded as a race, however those in DR and well as Haitians consider themselves a racial group whereas they're categorized as ethnic groups by others. This example shows the dichotomy between how one identifies themselves versus how others identify them and the lack of control we have over others' perception of us. It also shows the fluidity and interchangeability of these concepts. For some to see these groups as an ethnic group, while they can perceive themselves as racial groups refers to my earlier point about the confusion often directed towards the separation between race and ethnicity. Race and ethnicity are related, yet they are not the same. The two are not interchangeable, yet they are used as such because what is used to determine what qualifies as a racial group is different in the U.S. compared to Haiti or the Dominican Republic.

Racial Essentialism according to Hardimon

Michael O. Hardimon's, *The Ordinary Concept of Race* separates the concept of race from the conception of race and discusses how the concept of race itself is logical at its core but its conception has been twisted and allowed people to use the concept of race as a means to support racism. He refers to this process as a racialist development of the concept of race. Hardimon begins by explaining the difference between the concept of race and the conception of race and discussing how the intermingling and confusion regarding the separation of the two terms have led to many discussing the conception of race while under the impression they are describing the concept itself. Hardimon asserts that the ordinary concept of race is what race actually is, the nature of race, while the conception of race is how the concept of race is applied. He uses the term, "ordinary race" in reference to the concept of race itself, prior to any conceptualization. To properly describe the ordinary concept of race he attributes three (3) theses that apply to how one's race is decided and what makes up one's race; what he calls "the logical core or race. These three theses are; 1. A group that is distinguished by relevant and visible physical features, 2. A link by a common ancestor (shared ancestral lineage), and 3. Lineage originating in a distinct geographical location. These three are the basis of what race is and what it is described.

Hardimon's first thesis is that a racial group is a group distinguished by relevant physical features that stresses the importance of physical features that are attributed to racial differences. To Hardimon, this applies to things such as complexion and nose shape, but physical differences such as the appearance of an adam's apple are not applicable. The physical difference must be visible and able to be attributed to a race, whereas the appearance of an adam's apple is a

gender-based physical distinction. He also makes it known that these differences do not limit an individual to just one race and it is not necessary for certain physical attributes to be seen amongst everybody in a racial group. His second thesis is that those in a racial group are linked by a common ancestor. Under this thesis, race is considered an inherited feature from one's parents. His third and final thesis for the ordinary race is, those in a racial group must originate in distinctive geographical locations. The emphasis in this last account is that their ancestors originate in a specific location. It appears as though that would be an easy distinction to make, Black people originate from Africa, Whites from Europe, Asians from Asia, etc, however in it's practical use, an individual's continental origin and national identity may not be the same. Within a continent many may not identify themselves through their continental origins or be viewed by their continental origins. This is seen in situations such as Indian people not being referred to as Asian or Middle Eastern people not identifying themselves with their continental origin. These theses draw a distinct line between ordinary race and concepts such as nationality and ethnicity.

Hardimon insists that these three theses are the most basic things that apply to the concept of race but they are not without argument and controversy. For his first thesis, it can be argued that not everybody in a racial group shares certain physical traits. Similarly, many racial groups can share one physical trait (many races may have similar complexions for example). There are also a plethora of those who are mixed race or racially ambiguous who can not be easily grouped into one racial group. His second thesis is less arguable as people would be a part of the race their parents and ancestors are, however, this constitutes race as genetic which goes beyond the social aspects of race. It is important to question the role genetics play in race in terms of both physical traits within a race and the passing of one's race down their genetic line.

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His last thesis is the most controversial as many people believe continents are a socially crafted concept therefore they are not a valid way to base an individual's race off of. Additionally, most people are unaware of their origins and are typically able to guess based on their race, not the other way around. Take, for example, many black Americans do not know where in Africa their ancestors originated from, however, they do know they originated within that continent because they are black. Oftentimes, an ancestor of a black person originating in Africa is a deduction rather than a fact.

Hardimon also failed to address aspects of race that I believe are very important. One issue that isn't addressed within this text heavily is the existence of multi raced people. If race is genetic, does a person inherit both parent's races? Also, where do people who appear racially ambiguous or not as their race fit into this narrative? Another issue I will discuss in reference to Hardimon's theses is the lack of distinction between what race one perceives themselves as vs what others perceive them as. Oftentimes what one views themselves as isn't how they're viewed by others, so using Hardimon's three accounts how are we able to attribute a fixed racial identity when what they identify themselves as and what others identify them as are different? If we take, for example, a person raised in DR and considers themselves White or Hispanic, upon coming to the Us they can be identified as black. Now, let's examine this person under Hardimon's three theses of race in their perception. They may perceive themselves as white features but the features they consider white, lighter complexion, could now be perceived as dark if it's contrasted by people who are much lighter. Whereas in DR they could've been the lightest person around, therefore being referred to as white, could now not be seen as pale in comparison to those around them. The hair they once considered the straightest of everybody they knew can now be seen as

wavy. While this example may be looking at extremes, it is very possible, and often happens that a person's perceived racial identity changes as those around them change. This fluidity of race and choice of who's race should be attached to each individual. is something Hardimon fails to mention.

Once Hardimon has made clear the meaning to the ordinary concept of race he begins to speak of the conception of race. As mentioned earlier, by his standards the concept is what race itself is, whereas the conception is the application of race. Despite the ordinary concept of race being non essentialist and not referencing the social, intellectual, or cultural abilities or habits of an individual, the conception of race often does. He refers to this as the racialist development of the concept of race. He builds off of the ordinary concept of race and adds 6 new accounts that he believes can be attributed to the logical construction of race. The additional accounts are as follows; 4. A natural hierarchy is created in relation to the races, 5. Groups that satisfy 1-3 have fixed social norms, 6. There is a correlation between one's racial groups and their moral/ intellectual and cultural characteristics, 7. There is an "essence" of each group that explains why they possess certain characteristics and behavior, 8. There are shared "essential" characteristics amongst each group, and 9. Essential characteristics constitute the essence of its members.

Accounts 4-9 build off of the ordinary concept of race and form the logical core of the conception of race. From here, the concept of race is racialized in its conception and used as a means to divide people based on their race and create the racialized hierarchy we are familiar with today.

With the addition of 4-9, racial essentialism is introduced. Racial essentialism is the belief that every racial category possesses an “essence” that links them to their race, whether it be genetic or social.

“The literature commonly defines racial essentialism as a belief in a genetic or biological essence that defines all members of a racial category... Applied to racial identity, cultural essentialism is the belief that racial categories are associated with distinct, fixed, and stable cultural patterns... Cultural and biological forms of racial essentialism share the idea that differences between racial groups are determined by a fixed and uniform essence that resides within and defines all members of each racial group. However, they differ in their understanding of the nature of this essence. Both forms of essentialism may coexist; indeed, many people perceive race as having both biological and cultural foundations...” (Yalcinkaya)

This article continues to describe cultural essentialism as the idea that culture is passed through generations and their culture is reflected in their behaviors and beliefs, which can be likened to ethnicity. Returning to the topic of racial essentialism, while it shares the separation of the races like the original concept of race, it expands to attribute qualities to the races that aren't seen in the original concept of race, such as shared cultural norms within each race. It is this conceptualization that utilizes race as a means to create a social hierarchy.

To me, it seems that Hardimon agrees with racialism, the concept that people are naturally divided into races, however, he seems to question the importance stressed upon these differences. The question holds, “Is the concept of race essential?”. Ideally one would be able to answer with a simple yes or no,, but due to the role race has played in a historical and social context the answer is more complex. The concept of race is what gives power and importance to the conceptions of race so without this concept things such as segregation and racism would cease to exist. However, under Hardimon's account, the concept of race itself is neutral and therefore should not be eliminated, rather people's application of it should be changed.

However, this notion of separating race as a concept from racism as it's conception is ill-advised as the two are intrinsically linked. The basis of Hardimon's paper is that race is a neutral concept while racialization is the conception, which is the application of the concept. While it is true that race is a concept, racialization and attributing racial identities to individuals is a part of that concept. To separate the concept from its application is idyllic in this case (to avoid things such as racism) but it's unnecessary because a concept has no power without its application. It certainly would be ideal if the concept of race were neutral, namely a tool of categorization, but even that categorization is part of the application of race and it is not currently separated from the other aspects of racialization such as racialized social pyramid. For Hardimon to speak as if that race and racialization are separate entities (though reliant on each other) is untrue., and ignores the importance race plays in modern society

In modern times one might say one reason race is important is its role in the medical field and prescribing of medicine. For example, some diabetes medicine can cause hypertension amongst black men, something we would not be able to know without collecting data on black men, however, it is ignorant to assume this is one of the original intentions behind the construction of the concept of race and its subsequent conceptualization. When discussing race and it's the application it is both difficult and ignorant to ignore the social and historical notions of it. Hardimon attempts to conjure an image of a world sans race, where it has never been introduced into society, however, because race does exist and has become an important part of modern society it is nearly impossible to imagine the concept never existing in the U.S. The concept of race is not essential yet it is so intrinsically tied with many individual's lives that it's difficult to distance oneself from it and strip it of it's given importance. Ideally, race would play

an essential role in equalizing and removing the previous hierarchies that were built upon it and once said hierarchies were removed, the concept of race would be obsolete or used as a means for simple categorization (should that be necessary).

Based on what I have read I am able to conclude that the nature of race isn't definitive and its application even less so. While the concept of race itself is intended to be neutral and just used as a tool for categorization, it's application has done more harm than good. The concept of race is also not a necessary concept, as race is an interpretable concept and lacking in fact, as well as easily contradicted. It also fails to serve as a useful tool or term outside of social situations. Situations in which race is applied are often heavily contested including my earlier example about biological race and the use of knowing one's race in terms of medicine. This isn't to say that just because something can be argued or contradicted doesn't mean it's true, however as I'm not too medically inclined and am unable to prove to myself the biological differences amongst the races, it is only natural for me to question its validity, as well as how that conclusion was reached. Once more, I must highlight that should race not have been conceptualized and utilized in the manner that it was, it could have remained neutral, but it's weaponization overshadowed any good that could be drawn from the use of racialization. However, we live in a difference based society. If we are not focusing on race, something of a similar caliber will take its place. Perhaps that's the most frustrating thing about race to me. In many societies, devoid of a racially based social hierarchy, there are still other ways to divide people and create a hierarchy, whether it be gender, religion, complexion, ethnicity, etc.

Conclusion:

As you have garnered from the prior sections, many concepts individuals base their identities on; like race, nationality, and ethnicity, are socially created concepts that are valued based on the community we're in. The United States can be regarded as a racially fixed society as, amongst the many identifiers that exist, individuals tend to be personally attached to their racial identity, as well as viewed socially by others in a racialized way. If you contrast the US to other countries, it becomes clear that the usage of race as a main identifier serves to create different social groups as well as enforce a social hierarchy. This social hierarchy is a historical notion that has been maintained throughout US history, and it has been imposed on other countries through Western influence.

One country that had a non-racialized or ethnically based society prior to Westernization was Rwanda. Prior to the Belgians arriving, the social hierarchy was based on class and wealth. However, the Belgians introduced the categorical process of ethnicization and enforced that social hierarchy. This is one example that shows the fluidity of concepts such as race and ethnicity. As the Belgians were able to create and enforce ethnic identities on the Rwandans, it shows the lack of fact and stability in the aforementioned concepts. If these identifiers are able to be created and given, they can also be destroyed and taken away, proving the fluidity of these identifiers.

One example of an identifying concept being destroyed is the stateless people currently living in the Dominican Republic. On the island of Hispaniola, which houses Haiti and the Dominican Republic, the use of a racially based identifier was streamlined by Haiti being colonized by the French and populated heavily with African slaves, while the DR was colonized by the Spanish. Fast forwarding in history, a dictator in the DR, Rafael Trujillo, proposed an

anti-Haitian regime that rendered many Haitians, who were once granted birthright citizenship in the DR, stateless. Though they were ethnically Haitian, they were born and raised in the DR, spoke Spanish, and were a fixture in Dominican society (and many of them had no ties to Haiti). The revoking of their nationality and deportation to Haiti led to many having to start over in a new country (Haiti) that they did not have any social or physical connection to. Once again, the fluidity of these concepts, and their implementation to change a social hierarchy, show that they are socially created, and not based on any factual evidence.

I've discussed how the concepts of race, ethnicity, and nationality (amongst many others), are socially created and fluid identifiers, but what if they weren't? Richard A. Michael O. Hardimon discusses this in his work titled, *The Ordinary Concept of Race*. In his work, Hardimon discusses race as an ordinary concept that is fixed by 3 (previously mentioned) theses. Ascribing to these three theses alone would make the ordinary concept of race a factual concept that is used solely as an identifier, without any social implications. Hardimon expands upon his three theses and adds 6 more that account for the socialization of race, what he refers to as the conception of race. Under this conception, race is socialized and a social hierarchy is formed.

I, however, don't believe race is, or has ever been merely a tool for identification and lacking any social implication. Historically in the US, race was created as a tool to create and enforce a social hierarchy, placing white people at the top and black people at the bottom (with other races in the middle). Race, ethnicity, and nationality are all attached to social notions and are not used as mere identifiers. Race being created this way makes it an inherently social concept and it is not essential in identifying individuals.

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