

Excerpt from *Caste: The Origins of our Discontents* by Isabel Wilkerson (p. 64-67)

The idea of race is a recent phenomenon in human history. It dates to the start of the transatlantic slave trade and thus to the subsequent caste system that arose from slavery. The word *race* likely derived from the Spanish word *raza* and was originally used to refer to the “‘caste or quality of authentic horses,’ which are branded with an iron so as to be recognized,” wrote the anthropologists Audrey and Brian Smedley. As Europeans explored the world, they began using the word to refer to the new people they encountered. Ultimately, “the English in North America developed the most rigid and exclusionist form of race ideology,” the Smedleys wrote. “Race in the American mind was and is a statement about profound and unbridgeable differences...It conveys the meaning of social distance that cannot be transcended.”

Geneticists and anthropologists have long seen race as man made invention with no basis in science or biology. The nineteenth-century anthropologist Paul Broca tried to use thirty-four shades of skin color to delineate the races, but could come to no conclusion. If all the humans on the planet were lined up by a single order, tallest to shortest, darkest to lightest, it would confound us to choose the line between these arbitrary divisions. One human would blend into the next and it would be nearly impossible to make the cutoff between, say the San people of South Africa and the indigenous people along the Marañón River in Peru, who are scientifically measured to be the same color, even though they live thousands of miles apart and do not share the same immediate ancestry.

As a window into the random nature of these categories, the use of *Caucasian* to label people descended from Europe is a relatively new and arbitrary practice in human history. The word was not passed down from the ancients but rather sprang from the mind of a German professor of medicine, Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, in 1795. Blumenbach spent decades studying and measuring human skulls—the foreheads, the jawbones, the eye sockets—in an attempt to classify the varieties of humankind.

He coined the term *Caucasian* on the basis of a favorite skull of his that had come into his possession from the Caucasus Mountains of Russia. To him, the skull was the most beautiful of all that he owned. So he gave the group to which he belonged, the Europeans, the same name as the region that had produced it. That is how people now identified as white got the scientific-sounding yet random name Caucasian. More than a century later, in 1914, a citizenship trial was under way in America over whether a Syrian could be a Caucasian (and thus white), which led an expert witness in the case to say of Blumenbach’s confusing and fateful discovery: “Never has a single head done more harm to science.”

The epic mapping of the human genome and the quieter, long-dreamt-of results of DNA kits ordered in time for a family reunion have shown us that race as we have come to know it is not real. It is a fiction told by modern humans for so long that it has come to be seen as a sacred truth.

Two decades ago, analysis of the human genome established that all human beings are 99.9 percent the same. “Race is a social concept, not a scientific one,” said J.Craig Venter, the geneticist who ran Celera Genomics when the mapping was completed in 2000. “We all evolved in the last 100,000 years from the small number of tribes that migrated out of Africa and colonized the world.” Which means that an entire racial caste system, the catalyst of hatreds and civil war, was built on what the anthropologist Ashley Montagu called “an arbitrary and superficial selection of traits,” derived from a few of the thousands of genes that make up a human being. “The idea of race,” Montagu wrote, “was, in fact, the deliberate creation of an exploiting class seeking to maintain and defend its privileges against what was profitably regarded as an inferior caste.”

We accept the illogic of race because these are the things we have been told. We see a person with skin that is whiter than that of most “white” people, and we accept that they are not “white” (and thus of a different category) because of the minutest difference in the folds of their eyelids and because perhaps their great-grandparents were born in Japan. We see a person whose skin is espresso, darker than most “black” people in America, and accept that he is, in fact, not “black,” absolutely not “black” (and is thus a completely separate category), because his hair has a looser curl and perhaps he was born in Madagascar. We have to be taught this illogic. Small children who have yet to learn the rules will describe people as they see them, not by the political designations of black, white, Asian, or Latino, until adults “correct” them to use the proper caste designations to make the irrational sound reasoned. Color is a fact. Race is a social construct.

“We think we ‘see’ race when we encounter certain physical differences among people such as skin color, eye shape, and hair texture,” the Smedleys wrote. “What we actually ‘see’... are the learned social meanings, the stereotypes, that have been linked to those physical features by the ideology of race and the historical legacy it has left us.”

And yet, observed the historian Nell Irvin Painter, “Americans cling to race as the unschooled clings to superstition.”

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1. After reading this excerpt and viewing the videos, how has your definition of race changed? Explain.
 2. Explain this quote Wilkerson discusses within her book, “You know that there are no black people in Africa.”