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QCQ #3

Quotation:

“But race is the child of racism, not the father. And the process of naming, “the people” has never been a matter of genealogy and physiognomy so much as one of hierarchy. Difference in hue and hair is old. But the belief in the preeminence of hue and hair, the notion that these factors can correctly organize a society and that they signify deeper attributes, which are indelible—this is the new idea at the heart of these new people who have been brought up hopelessly, tragically, deceitfully, to believe that they are white” (pg. 7).

Comment:

Though it was rather difficult to pick only one quote from Ta-Nehisi Coates, as his writing is both beautiful and painful, this particular paragraph struck me. Previously, Ta-Nehisi Coates writes about Lincoln and how when he declared that “’government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from earth,’” at the battle of Gettysburg, it was a testament to who we consider to be the “people.” It is this idea which leads him, on the third page of the letter that he is writing to his son, to the notion of race. He brings up American’s believing in “the reality of ‘race.’ He talks about it as an idea, one that American’s tend to believe in as a “defined, indubitable feature of the natural world.” As a white person myself, this idea of race does not affect my daily life, my person, my body, so to speak. It has not been a reason for family members or friends dying too young and it has not prevented me from doing anything I have wanted to do. But this is my privilege, one that I was born into and one that stems almost entirely from the belief that, as Ta-Nehisi Coates states, race is part of the natural world. Because of this, the consequences that have arisen from racism can be “cast beyond the handiwork of men.” I think that the first line of this quote is especially important because it contradicts what many of us would perhaps normally think: that race did not come first but rather racism. As he further explains, though there have always been differences in appearance—color and hair—the belief that such qualities can organize a society is entirely wrong (although he does not say so explicitly, it is my understanding and also my opinion that such hierarchies are in no way right, even though I would be, by these standards, not at the bottom of a society organized as such). I often wonder if we as humans had never created the concept of race, if there would still be such a divide, even given what Ta-Nehisi Coates says about it being the child of racism and not the other way around.

Question:

In what ways does Ta-Nehisi Coates challenge your definition of race and racism? How does bringing up and emphasizing the idea of body contribute to what he is saying?