

The Social Construction of You

Background:



On November 4, 2008, voters in the United States of America made history by voting Barack Obama into the Presidency. Across the globe, newspapers announced that the United States had elected its first black President. Although Obama identifies as black, there is no shortage of people who contest his racial identity. Pointing to Obama's biracial background and his direct African heritage, writer Debra Dickerson explains why "Obama is 'black' but not black." She writes:

"Black," in our political and social reality, means those descended from West African slaves. Voluntary immigrants of African descent (even those descended from West Indian slaves) are just that, voluntary immigrants of African descent with markedly different outlooks on the role of race in their lives and in politics. At a minimum, it can't be assumed that a Nigerian cabdriver and a third-generation Harlemit have more in common than the fact a cop won't bother to make the distinction. They're both "black" as a matter of skin color and DNA, but only the Harlemit, for better or worse, is politically and culturally black, as we use the term.

Journalist Marie Arana argues that Obama is our nation's first biracial President. She contends:

To me, as to increasing numbers of mixed-race people, Barack Obama is not our first black president. He is our first biracial, bicultural president. He is more than the personification of African American achievement. He is a bridge between races, a living symbol of tolerance, a signal that strict racial categories must go.

The debates about Obama's race (and their historical underpinnings) reveal the way in which race is a social construction. They also demonstrate how race may not be defined by that individual alone.

Assignment:



This paper assignment asks you to consider, ponder, and defend the answer to a question that most, if not all, of you have grown up seeing as uncontroversial and indisputable: What is your race? For this assignment, you must identify your race, and write an argumentative paper that defends that response. In so doing, you should consider explaining the cultural, political, historical, and/or economic lines upon which your race has been constructed. Use the theories and ideas we have read and discussed for class as tools for constructing your argument. In other words, you must, as Obama has done in the media and throughout his life, identify your racial identity and defend it.

Details:



Consider your audience to be the students in this class. Use proper citation practices. Your paper must be double-spaced, and it must be no shorter than three pages and no longer than five pages. Please type your paper in 10 or 12 point Times New Roman font. Your margins must be 1" on all sides. Focus on the argumentative writing aspect of this assignment and demonstrating a synthesis of course topics up to this point. **Outline due in class Sept. 7, paper due 5 pm Sept 15.**