The Contradicting Factors of Race
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Assignment Description: To analyze the concept of “race” in terms of your own life and experience.

On the 29th of September 2009, I was asked to define my racial identity. While attempting an honest internal exploration of this subject, I found myself at an impasse. Repeatedly, I stumbled on a word that was considered to be simplistic, yet proving to be problematic. I cannot define my racial identity, if I cannot adequately define what differentiates “race.” As a society, we have attempted to define “race” by skin color, genetic makeup, cultural environment and racial identification tags (blanket statements or verbiage intended to segregate one group of people from another). I have found that these social attempts to define race do not support each other, but rather they are contradictory.

Though we may try, no human being can be defined by his or her outward appearance. Skin color is as superficial as the clothes on my back or the color of my hair. To define race in any manner is to create division, and for race to be defined by a person’s skin pigmentation is superficial and ignorant. The variations of skin color, within a single classification of race, are too numerous to create an absolute definition. More importantly, there would be no significance. America has a preconceived notion that skin color represents our ancestral roots when in fact, this could not be further from the truth. To look at me, I am considered to be a Caucasian male. In addition, the skin color of both my father and mother reflect the same racial identification tag, Caucasian. However, my father’s grandmother was an Apache Indian, while his grandfather was of German decent. In similar fashion, my mother’s grandmother was Creole (French and African), while her grandfather was of Irish decent. Obviously, my ancestral heritage somewhat contradicts my skin color.

I recognize that our genetic makeup has a role to play in skin pigmentation. Nonetheless, skin color is not a guarantee that an individual descended from a particular corner of the globe. In her essay “Three is Not Enough”, Sharon Begley quotes geneticist Luca Cavalli-Sforza of Stanford University saying, “the more we learn about humankind’s genetic differences, the more we see that they have almost nothing to do with what we call race” (Begley 271-272). In addition, Sharon Begley makes reference to Richard Lewontin, a population biologist of Harvard University, “who found that there is more genetic difference within one race than there is between that race and another” (Begley 271). Using myself as an example, to place a check mark next to my identification tag, Caucasian, could be contrary to my ancestral roots. Recently my brother shared a story with me about Anne Thompson, an African-American woman
who while applying for financial aid, placed a check mark in the box indicating her race as African-American. She was then accused of falsifying legal documents due to her skin pigmentation. Ms. Thompson’s skin pigmentation reflected the racial identification tag, Caucasian. Be that as it may, Ms. Thompson is a descendent of Africa who had relocated to America and acquired dual citizenship. Therefore by definition, she is African-American. This speaks to the false preconceived notion that a group of people can be defined by their skin pigmentation. However, if skin color is the differentiating factor for race, then I racially identify with my racial identification tag, Caucasian. However, the preconceived cultural and ancestral notions that tend to be covered by such a blanket statement, as Caucasian, I do not identify with.

I believe that our cultural background plays a major role in racial identification. In his article, Race and Mixed Race, Ranier Spencer explains that he and his older brother are of mixed decent. (297). Furthermore, he points out that his brother’s outward appearance, hair texture and the fact that his first seven years of life were spent in Germany are all factors that caused his brother to racially identify himself as white (Spencer 297). In contrast, Mr. Spencer notes that his outward appearance and environment caused himself to racially identify “elsewhere” (297). In similar fashion, my social environment, or cultural experiences, placed within me an identity contrary to society’s expectancy of my skin color. In school, on the playground, in the street and in the homes of my peers, this cultural identity was reinforced. Using language as a cultural example, it was not uncommon for me to be called a “nigga,” nor was it uncommon for me to call my closest friends the same. When I first became aware that I was perceived differently because of skin color, I was in the eighth grade and had somehow made it to a “trash can punch party”. The party was outside of my neighborhood, yet my “hood,” that is to say, my extended family or closest friends were there. I was being introduced so I regurgitated my neighborhood greeting, “What’s up nigga?” At that very moment, I was confronted with violence. Thankfully, my neighborhood rose up to smooth out any misunderstandings. The matter was solved peaceably, with a simple explanation of who I was. However, there should not have been a need for me to be explained. I was from the same social environment and had many of the same cultural experiences. I was perceived to be different only because of my skin color. Taking into account my experiences, it is obvious to me that our cultural environment plays a major role in how we racially identify ourselves. Therefore, if cultural experiences are the differentiating factors for race, I would racially identify with Black America. As a result, my racial identification tag may vary depending upon an individual’s perception.

Our identification tags are largely based on skin color. At the same time, these tags are used as an attempt to define and group us into cultural backgrounds, yet my skin color has never spoken to my cultural background. My life obstacles, social comfort zone, sense of fashion, language, music and favorite foods would be associated with the racial identification tag, African American. Many have described me as the “blackest-white guy they have ever met.” This is usually followed by, “and
it’s not fake either.” I attribute their reaction to my cultural upbringing. During the L.A. riots, sparked by the unjust treatment of Rodney King, I watched in horror as a white male was pulled from his truck and beaten for wrongs he did not commit. In this instance, I came to an understanding. Though I culturally identify with Black America, a stranger will label me according to their preconceived notion of my skin color. In the pressure cooker of racial tension, we as a society tend to group individuals together based on skin color. In the case of the L.A. riots, I would have been labeled a bigot and a racist. This is what my racial identification tag means to some members of society. Those who would pass judgment do not care to know my life experiences, nor would they endeavor past the shallow existence of skin color. My cultural experiences do not make me an African American, nor does my skin color make me Caucasian. Rather, it seems as though my skin color and cultural experiences further fuel the hatred of the narrow-minded and ignorant. In my youth, self-proclaimed neo-nazis labeled me a “wigger,” a “nigger lover,” a “traitor,” and a “sell out.” In addition, members of the black community labeled me as a “racist,” “wanna be,” “cracker,” and my personal favorite “pink floyd.” Furthermore, I have been taken aside by members of corporate America and have been reprimanded for my language being “too black.” These individuals went as far as to say, “you’re white, you need to act like it.” If racial identification tags are the differentiating factors for race, then I have no choice but to racially identify with each individual perception of what it means to be of my particular skin color and cultural background. However, I have concluded that neither my racial identity nor society’s perception of me holds any relevance to my life.

If race is as shallow as skin color, it is then insignificant and of no importance. If race is genetic or biological, then skin color cannot be a differentiating factor. If race is defined by one’s culture, then we are as different as our life experiences. If race is but a means by which we label human beings, then we are as different, and versatile, as each individual thought. The importance and insignificance of race is what we make it. Humanities’ differences are as numerous as the stars. Yet, we are all equally human. With this in mind, does race matter? Skin color cannot define an individual. Rather, as individuals, we define the importance of skin color. Genetic makeup possibly has scientific significance. Yet, it’s not relevant to everyday life unless it is relevant to you. The importance of culture, as a differentiating factor for race, is only relevant to the narrow minded; identification tags are only relevant to the ignorant. Does race matter? The answer is relative. Does race matter to you?

Works Cited
