Everyone desires to stand out. No matter the profession they wish to pursue, the effort they put into their reputation, or the reasons that motivate them to do so, succeeding is always the main goal.

When I was young, I loved the idea of being someone unique. A girl who stands out against the crowd and whose work and ideas can count for something in the future. I studied, I researched, I experienced the world as best as I could, and yet, there was a barrier. I never thought about my race as something that defined me.

With every standardized test, I marked the clear bubble “Black/African American” without a second thought. I actually thought of it as impractical; why in the world would they need to know that? It’s not like it changes my score, I thought. I had eventually achieved my lifelong goal of individualism and realized it was much harder than I believed. It wasn’t until I had begun accomplishing something with my knowledge and skills that I realized how much that bubble on that page actually meant.

I’ve been labeled and categorized as a variety of titles throughout my life. “Silly,” I could agree with; “weird,” I could live with; “black,” I was forced to accept. However, I don’t endure the projected hatred that was so prevalent during Dr. Martin Luther King’s time. I have friends of every different shade and every origin. I’ve gone to two schools: one a public school with the majority of the students being African American, and currently a private school that has more diversity in its student body. The transition was odd, as I’ve never been a minority—as defined by the color of my skin at least. With my final goodbyes to my elementary school memories, I realized how out of place I’ve really been. As a straight-A student at the time, I was constantly criticized as “too smart.” Being described as a person who is “not black enough” shocked me even more. I can’t remember what scared me more: the idea that there was ever a thing as too smart, or the air of inferiority my friends had towards me. In my mind, I was just as “black” as the rest of them. Metaphorically speaking, I was the black sheep in my class. In my entire school. I was singled out among my many friends.

But to many, I was not black.

“What does this mean?” I thought to myself. What does black actually mean, and why doesn’t it seem to fit with my identity according to many people I identify with? Since when did my character determine whom I was supposed to represent on the outside? Dr. King once said that he hoped to “look to a day when people will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character.” What would he say if the same people are, in fact, being judged by their character, but are being compared and discriminated against because it may not “fit” with the stereotypes attached to the color of their skin? Since when is intelligence a personality trait of Caucasians? When did the diverse genres of music I listen to—I’ve recently gained an obsession with Korean pop—make me an anomaly in the black community? All
of these questions swirled around in my head, and I started to believe what people were actually saying about me: I'm just not black enough.

About two years later, I was a rising sophomore at Winchester Thurston. I pursued the same goal of developing my character, but I still questioned the definition of black. I shied away from most of the students, hoping that they would just make a label for me that I could live with. Despite this, my personality shone through, and I made friends, like any other high school student. However, compared to my old school, there were very few African American students who really accepted me. I was fine with this; I had friends, and that's all that mattered. By then, I was a competitive rower for my school's crew team, I was a major trumpet player in Winchester Thurston's jazz band, and I had pretty decent grades. I was finally happy, and I thought I had found a place where I belonged. I didn't think I was seen as “not black enough.”

During that Thanksgiving break, however, I had an encounter that shook my confidence. I was accustomed to answering questions from older people about the reality of attending a private school. “What are the students like?” was in the top ten. I gave bromides as responses, and they usually accepted them. But one day, I was asked about my rowing career:

“What in the hell kind of a sport is crew for a person like you?”

I was puzzled. “I love rowing,” I replied.

“Rowing? That’s not like you. You’re too big anyway, and when’s the last time you’ve seen a black girl in a boat? I guess you aren’t that black after all. I knew those white people would change you.”

And just like that, my hopes were dashed. Besides my self-esteem about my weight being crushed into the dirt, everything I believed about my greater community became a lie at that point. From the words of an elder, I’m not black. How could I give up something I was so passionate about in order to be accepted? I recognized that no matter what I do, the color of my skin will scream “black” to a person of any other color, and to blacks, I am just a mistake. A failure to uphold the current black stereotypes that everyone knows about. An anomaly.

Two months ago, I watched the documentary Black Is... Black Ain’t by Marlon Riggs, and it inspired me to truly think about who I am as an African American—or, who I thought I was. According to Riggs, because one's black identity was so often limited, distorted and made shameful by whites, asserting a new black identity became important to many African Americans. His camera traverses the country, coming face to face with black people young and old, rich and poor, rural and urban, gay and straight, who are grappling with the paradox of several, often contested, definitions of “blackness”—just like me. Additionally, generalizations are being imposed upon African Americans not only by those outside the race, but by black people themselves. I was surprised that I wasn't the only one enduring this discrimination and relieved as well. Furthermore, every skin color has a set of beliefs portrayed by the media or just word-of-mouth to the public. How could I protest my lack of inclusion in the black community, when those of other races are suffering the same struggle? Maybe anomalies aren't the issue: labels based on
appearance are. No one should feel discriminated against because their personality doesn't fit these labels.

The war that Dr. King fought against discrimination is by no means over; the battle of white versus black may have been won, but not the battle of an individual versus his/her corresponding stereotypes, which is a battle that I have been fighting my entire life. A battle for many individuals whose complexion, class, speech, intellect, religion, gender or sexual orientation has made them feel like anomalies to the stereotypes they have been fighting against. To this day, I realize that these labels aren't leaving anytime soon. But this doesn't require that I, or anyone else, must live with them. I am me, the hard-working woman that I've aspired to become, and no label can take that away.