

A Letter to My Siblings

Artist's Statement

I grew up in a small, suburban white town where my family were the only other black people I knew in real life. That town seemed to value uniformity above all else and being black and queer placed me firmly outside of that. Most of the relationship I developed with my race and what it meant to be black became doing everything in my power to not be seen as black in the eyes of the people around me. I stayed out of trouble, I stayed involved, I was class co-president, I got good grades, I got into a good school. I worked hard to directly contradict every negative stereotype I could and in turn exhausted myself competing with these impressions of blackness in a battle I could never really win. I left that place not understanding my blackness, a part of myself I spent the better part of my life running away from.

As I looked through the class choices for my freshman seminar, I was struck by how foreign the title of this course felt to me: "(66-133) *We're Not Beyond Race: Race and Identity in America*". Although I didn't completely understand why at first, it resonated with me. Growing up, all I ever wanted was to be "beyond race", beyond what my race made people think of me, beyond what my race made me think of myself. But, this one course title directly contradicted the existence of something I had convinced myself I wanted. I signed up and was met with a lot of new information, a lot of history and systemic explanations of why race is the way that it is in America. The class did more than approach race structurally; it also connected systemic racism to the day-to-day experiences of racial minorities. With every new reading, every new lesson, I was constantly forced to confront my past and acknowledge how the nature of racism in America has negatively shaped my experiences and the experiences of people like me. On one hand, the class was a series of one impossible pill to swallow after another, but on the other the experience was incredibly validating. It taught me that I didn't really want to be "beyond race", that I wanted to be able to participate in my culture without feeling villainized for it. I wanted to be able to acknowledge my blackness, to not feel as though my blackness was a crime.

As we got further into the course, my professors assigned a concept video. They talked about how important it was to be able to share these ideas outside of the academic space in which we learned them. What good are these important understandings of race if we can't articulate them to people in different circumstances? I thought about the place where I grew up and the knowledge I wish I'd had back then. And the more I thought about it, the more I realized how similar the experiences of my siblings were to mine growing up with respect to race. Maybe they'd also wondered why no matter what they did, their race dictated how people understood them or why their race made them see themselves negatively. This course made my experiences make a little more sense to me, so I wanted to use that opportunity to share that with my siblings. I decided to do that by reading them a letter I wrote them in this video.

[Watch video on YouTube](#)

Dear Natalie and Terrence,

First off, I wanted to thank you. Howell was not an easy place to grow up while black, and the two of you sort of paved the way for me to exist a little safer than you were able to. But now that we're all out of there, I think it may be a bit easier to make sense of why being black was what it was in Howell.

So when you think about identity, there are two major pieces that make that up. What you think of yourself and what others think about you. Those thoughts about you start with the way that people categorize you. For example, people can mentally put you in the category of gay, or straight, or white, or black and so on. People have impressions of these categories that make them think it means something about who you are as a person, impressions that these categories predetermine your characteristics. But how do we develop what these categories "mean"?

We can develop these things through the use of something called social representations. Social representations are the ways in which a group is represented in the media that tell us and others what society views as what is possible or typical for a person of that group. For example, if I watched a bunch of 1940s, 1950s movies, and didn't personally know anything about being a woman, I might develop the idea that part of what being a woman means is tending to her family. A bit of an outdated example for sure, but the idea in essence is still present in how we use media today.

So in the world we grew up in, knowing only each other as black people, we had to rely on social representations on TV and in movies to tell us what being black was supposed to look like—which works both ways. All the people we were around also had to use those same social representations to tell them how to think of us. So, when we would turn on the TV to see black people as criminals and poor and in gangs as they're often portrayed, those representations became, to us, part of what being black means. And, it did the same for the people we lived around, and they treated us like that too. Like, we embodied these impressions of what they saw as black. Blackness means a million different things to a million different people because blackness isn't just one thing. The idea that blackness comes prepackaged with specific characteristics is utterly absurd and yet, we operated on the understanding that it did. We thought being black intrinsically fueled something ugly, and the people around us thought our blackness fueled something ugly too.

You were good kids, *we* were good kids, but because of what people thought our skin meant, they treated us as if we were inherently dangerous. The social representations that shaped what we thought being black meant were overall really negative. No wonder when we were younger we actively rejected our racial identities, no wonder we thought that black meant bad. The social representations limited how we understood blackness, and it limited what we saw as possible for ourselves. If all we ever saw black people as were criminals and impoverished, how were we supposed to understand we're capable of so much more? Which is a struggle not unique to us, but where we're from it seems like it. Everywhere white people look in the media they can always find someone that looks like them, so our social representations of white people include endless possibilities where we, by comparison, aren't as fortunate.

I'm sorry, that we grew up where we did, that these social representations didn't even have the chance to be thinned down by meeting fully-formed black people as they exist in the world rather than as a caricature of how society views us. I'm sorry that struggling with our racial identities became a fact of life, and I'm sorry that we were all, in a way, conditioned to see black as a bad thing. But, I am so proud of you both for expanding past what Howell told you was possible, what the media told you was possible and building your own paths to success. If only young us could've seen what we've become.

Love,

Camille