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Theory of Understanding

By gaining an understanding of who I am and where I am from, I have begun to make sense of the world and what I believe could enact change. I used to think everything was very black and white, believing that people got things out of luck. You are lucky to be born rich and unlucky to be born poor. The circumstances of one's life are not always of their choosing, sometimes people are just stuck. Those of us who excel and overcome certain trials and tribulations are lucky to still succeed. But everything really isn't that black or white. As I got older I began to learn more and understand that there is a structure in place that impacts us all. My understanding of the world has grown out of looking at it in a more complex way.

My understanding of myself starts where I grew up. Hailing from New York City, I grew up in the poorest borough in the city, The Bronx. But it never actually felt this way. I was raised by young parents in a rather combative home environment. During my teenage years, my parents split, transitioning my home into a single-parent home and creating a whole new set of challenges. Reflecting on how I grew up, I never believed myself to be poor. I was taught that poverty was those on the streets who begged for food and money and slept in train stations or tents for shelter. I didn't know that because of where I lived and the income my parents made my family was also considered to be "poor", or at least low income. As I grew older, I began to notice the word "low-income" frequently come up. This was often about my educational experience, and a new label was created for me— I was now a low-income student. With this label, I was able to receive things like free lunch or a waived test fee. I passively adopted the label even though I truly had no understanding of what it truly meant. My family always had necessities met such as food in the fridge and proper clothes for the weather.

My class consciousness truly developed in my later years, when I attended high school in one of the richest neighborhoods in New York City and when I came into college. After going to school with individuals who lived similar lives to me, I didn't know the other kinds of ways people were living. I was introduced to lifestyles I could only imagine living– vacations every school break, vacation homes, and

parents with Wikipedia pages and other prestigious awards. But as I grew older, I began to understand class a lot differently. I am privileged in my way; I am graduating with a degree from a private four-year school and my mother holds a post-graduate degree working what is classified as a white-collar job. Factors however such as *where* I grew up dictated what I had access to including the educational opportunities I had, the food we ate, out-of-school experiences, and what I was exposed to. Despite the advancements my mother made in terms of school and work, there were other factors influencing my socioeconomic class. For most of my life, I attended low-income schools, had more fast food places than supermarkets in my surrounding neighborhood, and lived in an area with a decent amount of crime. Despite this, my class offered me a lot of experiences to excel, qualifying for reduced-price programming to experience things such as summer camp and being accepted into a college program specifically for low-income college students. But these are things people should be able to have the option to do regardless of whether or not they can afford it. Before stepping outside of my community, I never saw the inequities that existed there or in my home life mainly because I had nothing to compare it to.

Comparison played a huge role in even how I thought about race. When my racial consciousness began is hard to pinpoint– it feels like I have known I am Black my entire life. But I know that isn't true. My Blackness became something I was aware of a lot earlier than class when others made me feel like it was something bad. The community I grew up in was not monoracial; people of all races and ethnicities lived in my neighborhood and went to my school. I am grateful to have grown up in a community as diverse in culture as I did. However, discrimination and anti–Blackness still occurred despite the majority of us being people of color. One of my earliest memories of being aware of my Blackness was when a girl told me she didn't like me because of my skin color. I didn't fully understand what she meant, but what she said, hurt me. My parents didn't really talk about race or Blackness growing up, and yet, in my home, it was all around. From the TV shows they watched to the art that decorated our homes, to even the food we ate, Black American culture was all around us. I remember talking to my mom about that situation and her talking to me about racism explaining things like slavery and the Civil Rights Movement. She mentioned Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Obama as examples of despite their work, discrimination

persists in this country. I still didn't understand what it meant that people could dislike me for something I couldn't even really control.

Anti-blackness began to look like other things as I got older when my understanding of my Blackness became deeply connected to my gender identity. People became more overt about the ways that they did or did not like Black people, especially Black women, fetishizing certain aspects of Black womanhood and girlhood, and denying certain aspects as well. I saw Black girls who acted normally get labeled as sassy or having a "bad attitude". I became cognizant of the way I acted and spoke and the way authoritative figures responded to it.  I began to understand desirability in ways that were misconstrued. Colorism and texturism became more prominent as I was fed narratives about what skin tones or features were more attractive. I internalized a lot of these messages, longing to look like a lot of my Latinx friends who had looser curly hair and lighter skin. At the same time as I am grappling with all of this, especially in my late middle school days, I began watching the news and reading headlines on social media with more intention. They were filled with details of the deaths of Black men and women all across America at the hands of police officers. I have begun to see the ways that anti-Blackness exists outside of my interpersonal relationships and ideas of desirability and attractiveness. Rather it is everywhere from the curriculum we are taught in school, to the structures that keep this country functioning the way it does. My understanding of how race has been constructed has grown deeper through the courses I have taken in college. It's easy to believe that the bad things that happen to Black people are our fault or happenstance due to our Black skin. In recent weeks I often return to James Baldwin's essay *On Being White...And Other Lies* in which he discusses the construction of a white identity. He writes, "America became white...because of the necessity of denying the Black presence and justifying the Black subjugation". White people have had so much control over the narrative of Black people down to the creation of Blackness whether they're conscious of it or not. I think of this as I reflect on how far I have come to unlearn anti-Blackness in my interactions with others and myself. I think of this as I reflect on my home neighborhood and the Bronx as a whole.

It's easy to blame all that is wrong with the world on "the system". It is something I heard all the time in high school and college. "Everything is messed up because of the system". What is the system? Sometimes it was said to be the patriarchy, sometimes capitalism, and sometimes white supremacy. But rarely ever was it talked about by my peers as a combination of all of these things. They don't exist as separate entities, but they're all interconnected. America's colonial history and the existence of white supremacy inform all of the oppressive structures that dictate who gets access to what—for so long people in my life blamed things like crime and poverty on the individual saying that they didn't work hard enough or didn't get the help they needed because they were too stubborn. They critiqued the people for the decisions they made, never considering why they made the decisions they. People have come to dictate what is right and wrong from some arbitrary set of rules, leaving no room for nuance. I became aware that these decisions are sometimes not by choice. Some people continue to work within the system because it offers them certain stability they didn't have. Some people still believe in the American Dream, continuing to perpetuate it. I know people who wholeheartedly believe this because they overcame challenges associated especially with their class. We are fed these truths because there are exceptions and we are forced to believe that we can be that too. This way of thinking though has caused many to fault those who aren't "trying" for their circumstances, redirecting the blame away from the system to the individual. This was something I heard a lot growing up; getting the opportunity to go to good schools and be part of enrichment programs as a low-income student of color was some combination of luck and hard work. Here there is no acknowledgement of the system at large that forces people to make certain decisions and choices. In coming to understand social inequities, I've come to see the nuance of things. How our world functions is so complex and it does take time to understand all of the big and small ways in which a certain order is sustained. I don't believe change comes out of following some arbitrary set of rules. I believe that to see real change, there needs to be a breaking of the current system and patterns. And yet, I do recognize how for people in certain positions this can be hard. To understand social inequities is to be open to nuance. It's hard to imagine an alternative when those who strayed away only ended up in more trouble. But I do believe that there is an alternative to this world that we live in. I think

of the man who started the free community library in my old neighborhood in 2021 during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, where people are allowed to take or leave books or exchange them. This was his way of making a change, promoting literacy in a community where the local school test scores are extremely low. In a community where there are multi-lingual households and learners. He saw a need in his community and found a way outside of the system to advocate and support his community.

I believe in the power of community. My ability to imagine this alternative world comes out of my education both formally and informally. There is a bit of irony in stating this as someone who has pursued this major, but I genuinely do believe in this. Allowing individuals to learn about the world and themselves in safe ways and conventional and unconventional ways, is so valuable. I find that it is important for me to make space for learning/unlearning, imagination, and community for individuals of all ages, and especially the youth I work with now and in the future. I remember for me, going to camp was a way for me to escape the madness of home. It was a place where I felt like I could truly be myself without judgment, explore new things about the world and myself, and overall find peace in a world that for me was so full of chaos all the time. The counselors I met there made me feel safe. They invited me in. They listened to me and valued my voice. Working at that same camp years later made me think a lot about the spaces I found myself in in my teenage years and what about those spaces that kept me there.

I find myself constantly wondering what it means and what it takes to create a space where young people can explore themselves, learn, and grow, in a safe place. Growing up around and in violence, I found myself needing to get away to find the time and space to breathe; to understand what was happening around me, to me. For me, that place wasn't always school, but when it was, it was in the stories I read and shared with classmates. It was in mountainsides at camp and dark rooms at photography classes, or on Saturdays during my mentorship program. I found communities where I could explore and grow. It was always the people and what they brought to a space that made me feel connected. Oftentimes, it was with folks of color, with similar backgrounds to me, people familiar with what it means to be a person of color, a teenager of color, growing up in the inner city. They were teachers, artists,

writers, corporate workers, and students. All very different, but what they all had in common was their ability to create this space.

Finding myself now in similar positions as the mentors I've had before, I want to create the same space I found comfort in. I've worked with organizations in my home city serving youth who are from the same sort of places as I come from. And even now outside of NYC, I find myself in spaces mainly with youth of color from high-need places. In my time at Clark, racial justice work has become something I have advocated for in my work through BSU and even in the research I have conducted. In a predominantly white institution, I recognized the need to be around people who understood and affirmed my experiences and found that others needed that too. In leading the organization, I hoped to have conducted programming that made people feel safe or comfortable to open up to others or enjoy the company of people who have similar interests to them. My work does not stop here. Though I am leaving Clark uncertain of what exactly I will be doing next, I know two things are true. I will never stop learning through self-reflection and dialogue and I am determined to continue to foster community for myself and others in whatever spaces I occupy.