



We're not different. We're just not the same.

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"We're not different; we're just not the same" is an interactive gallery installation with sound and photography. The project explores a topic that is usually discussed behind closed doors: interracial dating. Over the last year I interviewed people who have dated outside their race. I was curious to hear them describe their experiences with their partners, families and peers. The installation is composed of a collection of these personal stories in audio form. The installation offers the visitor the opportunity to reflect and respond to these stories in writing. My hope is to generate conversation on a topic that is not often spoken about in public.

"The only member of his family I've met is his mother..."

I am curious about is the often-blurry interconnections among, race, gender, sexuality, and class. A topic usually discussed behind closed doors is that of interracial dating. The project consists of multiple stories shared by those who have experiences with dating outside of their race. Doing this will not only allow those who have dated outside of their race to tell their stories/experiences but it will give insight to those who have not. I am interested in the way people will receive the varied stories and respond to them. I think that sometimes it feels as if we are polar opposites (due to our race, gender, sexuality, and or class), but I believe that we all have similar stories. Comedian Pedro Hernandez once told me "We're not different. We're just not the same." This statement was one that resonated with me. It categorizes people in the gray area rather than black or white. Although I have never dated outside of my race – I find the topic very interesting. I've realized the topic of interracial dating is one of controversy; I am a firm believer that if something is controversial that there is a reason to explore.

The title "*We're not different. We're just not the same*" has transformed meaning after I originally began working on the project. At the start of the project I saw the title as describing the experiences of those interviewed as related but not the same. After seeing the reception by

the audience I have discovered that the title describes how the relationships of those who have and haven't dated outside of their race are intertwined. Although they both may have not experienced interracial dating, the topic is one that everyone can relate and dialogue about.



I chose to attend the University of Michigan because I wanted to get the “full college experience”. One thing that I failed to realize was that I would have to be a full time student and part time spokesman for the entire African American race. Coming from a predominantly African American background I was never questioned about things because everybody either knew or it was second nature to them. At first some of these questions confused me because I couldn't tell the nature in which the question was being asked. “How do you get your hair to do that?” “Did you go to Cass Tech or Renaissance?” (Two of the leading high schools in the City of Detroit; that happen to be predominantly Black) After talking to older guys within the Black community I realized that sometimes people just don't know – and that it wasn't always my job to educate them. Although I had been enlightened from others that had encountered this, I still feel somewhat obliged to defend my culture and myself. This heightened my interest in issues of race, gender, sexuality, and class. Interracial dating is an interesting focal point because it is an issue that has been raising eyebrows for years – yet goes without discussion.

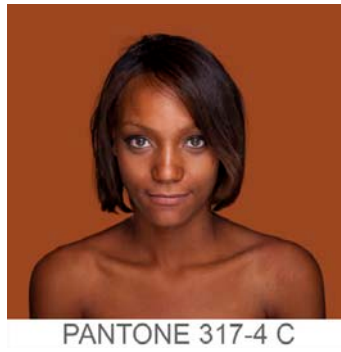
The aim of my project is to give the audience actual situations, advantages/

disadvantages, and stories of those who have dated outside of their race. Originally I'd recorded conversations of people talking about their thoughts on interracial dating. The topic was so broad that the response eventually became politically correct and dishonest. This is what ultimately drove me to get stories of those who actually have experienced dating outside of their race. I am creating a series of recorded interviews which are all stories told by those who have experience with interracial dating. The viewer has the option to choose any of the stories (which vary in length and subject matter). I decided to allow the viewer to choose the story because they are choosing who they want to engage in a "conversation" with. The names of each storyteller are listed along the photograph, which gives the audience a more personal connection. A photograph of the storyteller accompanies every story. Each photograph is a black and white frontal view (of those interviewed) against an all white background, and the mouths of each person have been cropped from the screen. I chose to make the photographs black and white to go along with the statement that "We're not different. We're just not the same." Making all of the photographs black and white allows the audience to look at the people the same, rather than noticing their difference in skin tone.

"I feel like it was always prevalent that I was a different color than them..."

After asking how to incorporate race into the postcard that represents my project, artist Angelica Dass was mentioned. Angelica Dass has a project entitled *Humanae a Paris* which is based on a series of portraits in which the background is dyed with the exact Pantone® tone extracted from a sample of 11x11 pixels of the portrayed's face. The project's objective is to record and catalog all possible human skin tones. Those photographed by Dass have the same frontal view I decided to use for the photographs within my project. The tension between the person photographed and the viewer is much similar to an intimate conversation between two

people. Lastly, I will invite those who listen to the stories to respond. A notebook will be accessible for them to tell their own stories, or respond to the stories they heard. Two people will be able to listen to the stories at a time, emphasizing on the aspect of relationships and experiencing similar things.



Throughout the audio piece I will give the audience answers to questions they may have had regarding parental/ familial acceptance, cultural differences, etc., and or an overall insight to the “realm” of interracial dating. I feel that is important that I collected interviews from those who have dated outside of their race opposed to getting a broad perspective of those who have not; the project will be more effective because the stories told are genuine. It is also important that those who have encountered these situations know that their voices are being heard, and their stories are being told. Assumptions and stereotypes are often associated when thinking of interracial dating, this is a way for those statements and thoughts to be silenced. This project will provoke inclusive conversation about a topic that is usually deemed controversial. Each interviewee was given the same prompt, “What is an interesting story/memory you have in regards to your personal experience with interracial dating?” Although the interviewees were given the same prompt the responses varied. After collecting each story I edited them using Final Cut Pro. Allowing the viewers to feel as if they are “gaining access” to an otherwise private conversation is the eventual goal of the project.

“The unit of a family is totally different...”

As an avid movie watcher I gravitate toward movies that have depth and a message to take away from them. Spike Lee films has not only had an impact on my project but how I look at and address things such as: the Black community, the media, Greek life and urban crime. . I wanted to emulate Lee’s ability to take a controversial topic and display it in a way that is easily received. Lee says his works... “Have encouraged and in some cases, forced us to interact with what’s on screen and perhaps more important, with each other...” (Massood xix) - encouraging interaction with people is the focus of my project, if I get responses I feel that is one less assumption made about interracial dating. Films that I used for research were *She’s Gotta Have It* (1986), *School Daze* (1988), *Do the Right Thing* (1989), and *Jungle Fever* (1991). With research taken from *The Philosophy of Spike Lee* by Mark T. Conrad, I had a better perspective on where Lee was coming from and what he intended by specific scenes and the films themselves. One excerpt that influenced this project is taken from *The Philosophy of Spike Lee*, it reads:

“He [the Negro] simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of opportunity closed roughly in his face. This, then, is the end of his striving to be a co-worker in the kingdom of culture, to escape both death and isolation, to husband and use his best powers and his latent genius” – *W.E.B. Dubois, “Of Our Spiritual Strivings”* (pg. 95).

I feel that Dubois’ quote has a definite connection to the experiences that I have encountered while at college. As I mentioned before, it took a while for me to get over the fact that people would ask sometimes controversial and stereotypical questions. Questions that they

targeted towards me as if I was the spokesman for the entire African-American race. As time passed and I matured, I realized that I couldn't fault those that questioned me about those things because I too had things I was unaware and uncertain of (pertaining to other races).

Spike Lee's *Jungle Fever* (1991), a film that explores interracial dating within an urban setting definitely played a major part in my decision to explore interracial dating. In the film, Flipper a married African American architect has an affair with his assistant Angie an Italian-American. Alisha Tillery from *Uptown Magazine* states:

The affair seemed to stem from both characters' deep curiosity about each other's race, more so than mere physical attraction, from the contrast in their skin colors—his dark complexion to her pale, “lily-white” skin to their upbringings, which were worlds apart.

After disclosing his secret affair to his best friend, Flipper confessed, “I have to admit I've always been curious about Caucasian women.” The friend declared that he had “the fever, Jungle Fever,” described as an attraction between two different races. (Tillery)

My inspiration for this project stemmed directly from a particular scene in which Drew (Flipper's wife) and a few of her friends conversed about Flipper's affair and interracial dating in its entirety. The conversation was full of very interesting statements such as “I do date black men; but I also date Chinese, Latino, Jewish the full spectrum.” and “Do any of you know what it is like not being thought of as attractive?” After seeing this kind of conversation on screen I wanted to know how people really felt about interracial dating. Previous conversations [surrounding interracial dating] I've had were usually pertaining to Black men dating White women and the disgust Black women had for it. Lee's *Jungle Fever* had a very specific point of view; I have decided to give multiple points of views by allowing participation by the interviewees.



To conclude, I believe the audience will be able to enjoy the wide range of stories being told. The idiom “don’t judge a book by its cover” is the lesson learned after listening to the stories. No one knows what he or she will hear, how in depth the storyteller decides to go, or how long the story is after selecting it. After installing my project into the Jean Paul Slusser Gallery I went back to read the stories and or comments written in the journals I provided. One response read: “Connected with Antonio as black man entering Latino space. Had to have a sit-down with the patriarch before the 1st date. Wasn’t even that serious.” Another read: “My mom couldn’t sleep at night knowing that I was going on dates with a Hispanic boy. She would come up to my room distraught and sleepless saying ‘I just keep seeing you pushing a lawnmower’.” After experiencing my project, I want the audience to know that despite our differences we all have stories to tell. Most importantly I want them to leave knowing and believing that – We’re not different. We’re just not the same.

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