

An Open Letter to My Younger Self

A Personal Documentary Film

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Thesis Proposal

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I'm not seeking to answer questions with my thesis, and I'm looking to create an entry point for dialogue in regard to race relations in the musical community of blues in Portland, OR. I have no intentions of speaking beyond the community to which I am so profoundly in admiration. Portland, OR, has never been known as the hot spot town in America to listen to the blues. That being said, there is a rich history, and current musicians still playing the soulful genre of blues. There are key venues, popular artists, and artists just gigging as their passion. It seems that no matter where you go in the United States, there will be a blues scene, and that is true of Portland. While the predominant genres of music in Portland would consist mostly of indie acts and punk rockers, blues here in Portland represents a tradition as American as pie. When asked if he knew much about the blues scene here in Portland, Jermaine (local soul musician) said, "yeah, if you wanna talk to a bunch of old white dudes." This is perhaps the current sentiment of blues, a genre crafted and invented by African Americans but popularized by white bands like the Rolling Stones and Eric Clapton. The complex racial relations between white residents and black residents of Portland is riddled with problematic and racist policies, including and certainly not limited to redlining and gentrification. The history of the blues as a whole could be seen as a great representation of aspects of white people copying yet distancing themselves from black culture at the same time. This is where I want to do a nosedive into the history of blues in Portland and how it affects the scene today.

Enter me. I'm a young white dude looking to explore the world that has inspired me and influenced my life since I was a young child. Listening to the great blues players throughout the years as a young child helped shaped the way I felt about music in general. I would go a step further to say that the comfortability in melancholic situations that happens in blues lyrics helped define my personality today. The likes of BB King, Buddy Guy, Albert King, Jimi Hendrix, Stevie Ray Vaughan, Eric Clapton, Muddy Waters, and so many more musicians helped me through hard moments, happy moments, and all the in-between moments in my life. I am no stranger to blues music, but I am a stranger to the musicians who influence my life in such a grandiose way. My relation to blues music needs to go from adoring the ever-famous quarter notes of BB King to understanding the complexities and context that surround the genre from the people who still practice it.

For my thesis project, I will be creating a short documentary video that explores the narratives of 2-3 blues musicians in Portland, OR. The foundation of the documentary will be the interviews. However, the b-roll footage will be stimulating and engaging. I intend to have live footage of gigs/shows along with personal footage relating to the musicians being interviewed, amongst other smaller clips (like a panning shot of certain venues for context). To further this context, I plan on doing portraiture of the musicians both in the video and ones not included in the video as main narrative drivers. These will either consist of environmental portraits or more formal studio portraits. For now, the technical aspects of my project that I can speak to would be mostly the consideration of film vs. digital for the photography portion. I am going to use digital to help give the photos a more contemporary look, and I want to avoid

certain nostalgia that film can evoke, especially to an audience that is not familiar with fine art photography.

My process is going to involve a lot of written research on the history of blues music, Portland's racist policies, and the psychology of music. More importantly, my research will be done through informal interviews with musicians by integrating myself into the scene as a photographer. I will be speaking with and conducting interviews with as many blues musicians I can talk to and who will talk to me. I'm going to be finishing a few books in order to help inform the questions I ask the musicians while conducting informal interviews. After enough informal interviews have been conducted, that's when I will be recording a formal interview with musicians that accurately portray and represent the scene based on the information I have gathered in the field and through academia.

In summary, the line of inquiry for my thesis project is the investigation of the blues music scene in the Portland, OR area. The main point of the investigation will be how music can mend or divide racial relations within a musical community. Specifically, I will be looking at the greater context of racial issues in Portland in order to use my love of blues music as a jumping point for deeper conversations about race in blues music. This will be synthesized in the form of a video documentary with supporting photographs for context.

Abstract

This is a personal documentary that confronts my racism, especially as a white cisgender male. It's approximately 15 minutes long. This video follows and explains my racist behaviors as a teenager and young adult and my transition into having anti-racist values. It explores the location in which I was raised, and how my relationship with Traverse City, Michigan played a role in developing my racist behaviors. This is not meant to be an excuse for my racism, nor a justification of it, but rather it's an exploration of the journey it took for me to let go of old behaviors and embrace new values.

The video is woven together through an open letter to my younger self, and supplemented by videos and stills that reflect how my relationship with the environments I'm in and have been in, have influenced me.

Artist Statement

Caelum Gay is an artist who works primarily in photography and video. He is interested in introspective work that often exudes vulnerability. The subjects that Caelum has addressed in his works have included, mental illness, addiction, and most recently his racism. This video, *An Open Letter to My Younger Self*, explores his journey through racism and how he has landed in his commitment to anti-racist values. Caelum's work is largely based on personal experience regarding the subject matter he's focusing on. This is especially true for this thesis video which is based solely on personal experiences, growth, and understanding. Caelum is looking forward to continuing his exploration of video as his main creative outlet. In the future, Caelum hopes to collaborate with more filmmakers and communities to create meaningful entry points for dialogues that are difficult to talk about.

Thesis Speech Outline

- Hello, and thank you for attending my defense. As Linda so kindly mentioned, my name is Caelum Gay. I'm a photography major who has fallen in love with video as well. I'm 25 years old, and I bring up my age because it helps give context to the video essay you will be watching.
 - This is a video essay that confronts my racism, especially as a white cisgender male.
 - It's approximately 15 minutes and with that short introduction, let's watch the video.

(Watch the video along with the panel and audience)

- I'd like to quote the beginning of Part 2 from the book "me and my white supremacy" by Layla F. Saad.
 - "You will need three things for this work
 - Your truth
 - Your love
 - Your commitment"
- So, as you saw, this visual essay of my journey through confronting my racism helps chip away at the constructs I have built around white supremacy. It was my goal to bring forward the truth, love, and commitment, to work on confronting my racism.
- But, let's address the elephant in the room...I'm a white male talking about race. Not only that, but I've openly admitted to throwing around slurs. I want to take a moment and express how ugly this makes me feel. I'm expressing the guilt I feel but the goal is to confront behaviors and explain them, not to justify them or excuse them.

- Now, for a little background on this project, because it has come a long way from where I was when I did my proposal. Originally I wanted to talk about race but hadn't done the

work to really understand my relationship with it. I was hoping to talk about blues music to investigate this relationship and to show admiration for the musicians I am so fond of, here in Portland, and in general. However, with the major events of Covid and the murder of George Floyd, combined with my own struggles at defining what my original proposal was aiming to do, I found myself at a crossroads.

- I was stuck in a place where I was struggling conceptually to achieve the project in a manner I would have been proud of. I wanted to make work involving the black community but I had not confronted my own racism.
- It's when I began to look introspectively and with the guidance of Linda, that I was able to come to the conclusion that this work needed to be about my experience.

- This journey in the video explores physical places and my relation to them at the forefront. However, the subplots of alcoholism and bipolar disorder help provide a level of vulnerability and truth. These subplots help make the video more accessible and create more entry points into the true focal point of finding one's relationship with racism.
 - They are also part of my truths and have helped me foster love for myself and others.
 - The truth was the bedrock for this film, my truth that is, and I want to dig deeper into the meat of that.
- This project involved constant introspection, which to be honest I was not ready for. The journey has had a profound impact on my emotions. Revisiting painful memories brought up a lot of darkness inside of my mind. In combination with personal struggles that have occurred this semester, this project has been a revolving door of creation and introspection. Playing through the memories of bipolar, alcoholism, and racism has been an intense process. Looking at how severely alcoholism has a grip on my voice and my life made a severe relapse this semester all the more painful. However, this project also provided me with a lifeline to channel my energy.

I'm going to talk about the structure of the film.

I began with me on screen telling an emotional story about myself to engage the viewer.

The second part I wanted to juxtapose my experience in Traverse City to my experience in Portland. I used intercutting to create tension, and I used only natural sound to emphasize the difference between the two cities. The sound functions as the narration.

After establishing myself and the locations, I use narration to support the story.

At this point the film follows linear time to provide a clear path through my life.

Cutting between selected video and still images, I take the viewer through the story.

I used myself, as the protagonist, to elicit a vulnerability that people will hopefully relate to. The expectation isn't that when a viewer finishes this video they will be "cured of racism", we know this is impossible, but rather the expectation is that the viewer might look inward and assess where they stand with anti-racism.

- Through a curated selection of video clips that express reflection metaphorically (think of the Quad at the University of Arizona or the Portland skyline shimmering in the river at night), I'm able to place the viewer in a space that people often spend time actually in contemplation.
- Audio is certainly crucial to the success of this video essay as well. The script was carefully crafted with many iterations. I recorded the narration using a tripod as a tent with a quilt surrounding me and my microphone to hone in on the audio quality.

- Along with the narration, there is the importance of ambient noise. This consistent audio underneath the narration helps to evoke more emotion during moments of silence. For example, the silence during the shot of George Floyd's memorial is purposefully lacking ambient sound in order to reflect on the gravity of what happened.

- It's over the course of this summer and into the fall that I experienced my first protests as a participant as opposed to a documentary photographer or a passive observer. The first few protests were highly stimulating and amplified the urgency I felt after George Floyd's death. The marches across different bridges here in Portland were powerful demonstrations. The moment that comes forward to my mind is laying down on the concrete of Burnside Bridge with thousands of other protesters for almost 9 minutes, the same amount of time it took for George Floyd to die.
 - There were hardly any sounds in those precious few minutes, just the noise from drones flying overhead and a helicopter that garnished national news coverage.
 - The rest of that protest and the other protests I participated in were very vocal, chanting " No Justice, No Peace", chanting the names of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, Just two of the many who have died at the hands of the police.

- During these protests is when my dedication took a new page. It wasn't enough to show up and be present. I needed to find an outlet to more directly address the racism in this country and myself specifically.
- So I traveled back to my hometown in Traverse City.

- I went back to Traverse City to gather footage, and to journal my experience being there. This was the starting point of how the script came to be. Seeing Trump sign after Trump sign popping up in yards and in more grandiose ways created a deep feeling of resentment inside of me. I was angry at the place that helped raise me. I thought the city had provided me with the tools I needed to be a respectful person. This anger was further brought out as I realized how complacent Traverse City has been during times of great unrest in Portland. There was no need for the vast majority of residents to be upset in Traverse City. With a population that's just shy of 93% white, it seems the only thing that was troubling people was just how unrestful certain urban areas were.
 - As I journaled my way through Traverse City, I found I was upset with the nuances and the outright blatant efforts of racism that the city expressed, however, I found I was also angry at myself, and at things that had nothing to do with racism.
 - I have a lot of unresolved anger for how my basketball career ended (my decision) and how my drinking career consequently started (also my decision).
 - Looking back at where this anger came from helped me open the scope of what I was looking for inside of myself and how the relationships of aspects in my life were woven together.
- My exploration of Traverse City turned out to be just as much a journey of self-exploration. Those early ideas of what I would want to tell myself in high school

began with letting go of my resentment for quitting basketball and included avoiding alcohol as an active coping mechanism. Once I could start to get some of these initial issues out of the way I could start seeing the relationship between them and my racist behaviors.

- That's how this project went from a documentary looking outward to a visual essay exploring my own journey. I want to tell my younger self everything I have learned, and more importantly I want to offer an access point for people like me.
- To reach this audience the work will exist mainly through avenues like social media and Vimeo specifically, to reach the most amount of viewers as possible.
 - I will also be entering this film into film festivals with the aim of spreading its reach so that more people might view it on Vimeo.
 - My target audience is other white folks, especially younger people from more rural areas. It is my attempt to relate and persuade my audience of the importance of personal awareness in relation to racism and white supremacy.
- It's one video from one person but will hopefully function as an indication of and an agent of change.

- I'm so grateful that I was able to create a video that I am proud of. I am proud to have moved past old racist behaviors, and I stand by the importance of acknowledging them and sharing so that others might relate. In addition, I understand that my growth in understanding and practicing anti-racism is not over, the work must continue.

Thank you for your time, thank you for being here with me, and a very warm and sincere thank you to Linda, my mentor. You have helped me create work that I'm proud of, and more importantly, you helped me stay afloat to have this work to share now. And with that, I think it's time to open things up for questions and discussion.

Annotated Bibliography

Artis, Anthony Q. *The Shut Up and Shoot Documentary Guide*. New York ; London: Focal Press, 2014.

This source is a hands-on approach to filmmaking and has lots of technical guidance to help create a documentary vision. The information is very reliable and had relevant and up to date insights that were very helpful for me as I began shooting my documentary. Through it I gained the technical prowess to achieve certain shots and approach interviews that I might not have had otherwise.

Diangelo, Robin J. *White Fragility : Why It's so Hard for White People to Talk about Racism*. London: Allen Lane, An Imprint Of Penguin Books, 2019.

This source confronts racism from a white perspective. The first step is acknowledging it exists. I found this book to be very useful in the beginning stages of my thesis and it's reliable because of its preface about being from the perspective of a white author. I used this source as a guide to approaching talking about race from a white male perspective.

Dietsche, Robert. *Jumptown : The Golden Years of Portland Jazz, 1942-1957*. Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 2005.

This source pertains to the golden era of jazz in Portland, and how it was essentially erased through whitewashing. It was not as useful for my personal research by the time I had switched to a more introspective project, however, the history added perspective and depth to my understanding of how racism impacts the Black community. I aim to use this source in further work that I make.

Dunaske, Joe. Joe's Relation with Race and Traverse City. Interview by Caelum Gay, September 2020.

This interview was documented on camera and was a potential source of material for my thesis. Joe has lived in Traverse City his whole life, which made him a reliable source. He is also a close friend which could have created biases in his answers, but more importantly, it created a safe atmosphere to have a frank discussion. This interview was helpful as it functioned to reinforce the feeling that I personally had about the city, and my behaviors as a teenager.

Haine, Charles. *Color Grading 101 : Getting Started Color Grading for Editors, Cinematographers, Directors, and Aspiring Colorists*. New York ; London: Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group, 2020.

This source helps to explain the theory behind color grading and some technical aspects of how to achieve the look you're going for. This book was very reliable, as it had great examples from relevant films. I used the information in this book briefly to lightly color grade my film.

Saad, Layla F, and Robin J Diangelo. *Me and White Supremacy : How to Recognise Your Privilege, Combat Racism and Change the World*. London, England: Quercus, 2020.

This book explains relationships with white supremacy. The book is reliable and notably comes from an author of color to bring a non-white perspective. This book helped me grapple with tough questions about how I need to be honest with myself in order to address my implications in white supremacy.

Singer, Margot. *Bending Genre : Essays on Creative Nonfiction*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2014.

I read the essay: "On Fragmentation" by Steve Fellner, which was about nontraditional ways of writing for nonfiction. This source was reliable as it is from a successful author in the genre. I found it particularly useful for understanding how to put "beats" into my narration.