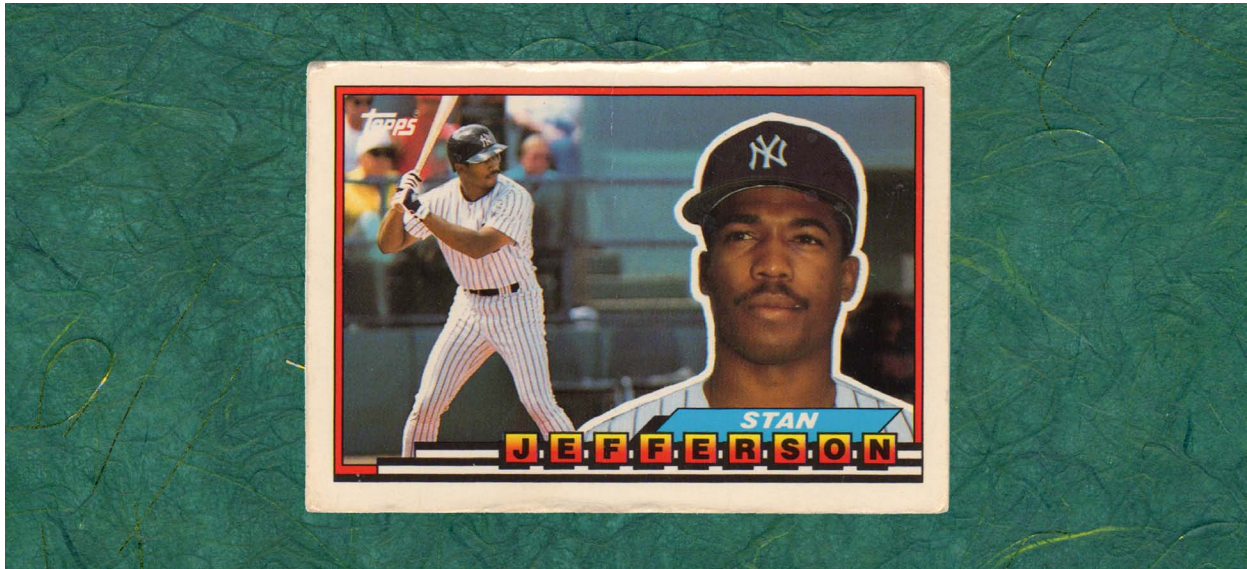


My Name
Esteban Jefferson

My family doesn't know exactly where the name Jefferson comes from. It is most likely a slave name, but we don't know who owned us, or for how long. Malcolm X changed his name to take ownership away from the name Little. I like having the name Jefferson – I have the same name as one of our founding fathers, and represent exactly what they didn't want to happen in this country. Jefferson even had his own family of *octaroon* babies, who were enslaved until adulthood, but today that seems to be a source of shame for him at Monticello.



One of my uncle Stan's baseball cards from his MLB days

Everardo, as far as I can tell, is a South and Central American name. My grandfather's parents were Jamaican, and we still have relatives (who I've never met or spoken to) living in Jamaica. His name was Everod Jefferson, which became Everardo for the oldest males of the following two generations. I'm named after my dad, but from birth I went by my middle name to avoid confusion.

Everod's family moved from Jamaica to Panama to work on the construction of the Canal. They were called *chombos*. Initially, Everod went to school in the Canal Zone, but at age 12 he was sent back to Panamanian school and, spitefully, they put him in 2nd grade. He was too big for the furniture. Everod eventually met Vida, my grandmother, the daughter of a Portuguese Sephardic Jewish woman and a man from India, both of whom I know almost nothing about. We think the man's last name was Le Conte (likely a slave name), or some variation of that name. Everod's mother didn't want him to be with Vida, because her family was poor, but they got married anyway and had four kids.

Vida's half-sister, Amy, moved to America, and eventually was able to contact Vida. Amy told Vida to move here, which she did, by herself. Vida worked alone as a dishwasher for two years straight, saving up enough money to bring the rest of the family to New York's South Bronx. Once they were all here, Vida and Everod worked long hours and multiple jobs to support the family; Everod spent years working as a New York City subway door operator. The family spent Sundays together, but otherwise the four children were often on their own to find their way in the Bronx. My dad, the oldest of the four, became their de facto leader.

One day Everod came home from work to an empty house. Everything was gone, except a lone frying pan on the stove. Vida and Everod both got some on the side; Vida had decided to leave Everod for a new boyfriend, who later would leave her. She never married again, and eventually moved to Georgia. Everod had one more child, Stanley, with his second wife. Stanley made it to the MLB, even playing on the '86 Mets, and on Everod's favorite team, the Yankees. After a career-ending injury, Stanley became a cop, then a detective, then Internal Affairs, before retiring.

Everod divorced again, and eventually married a third woman, Tina, who had known and loved him since the days they had both lived in Panama. They lived in Co-Op City, and when he died, she moved back to Panama.



My mom, me, and my grandparents Stephen and Barbara (“Pa-pa” and “Gra-ra” in baby-talk)

My mom’s father was James Stephen Caples, and the name Esteban (Spanish for Stephen) comes from his name, just like the name Everardo comes from Everod’s name. Just as I go by Esteban, he spent his whole life going by Steve. The Caples family’s history is well recorded – they came to America from England in the 1654, and have been American as fuck ever since. They’ve lived in the North and lived in the South. They fought in the Revolution. They fought for the Union, and they fought for the Confederacy. They’ve owned slaves. The history of the Caples family is largely the history of white people in the United States.

Stephen was an engineer who served in the Air Force; he fought in World War II and Korea, and he eventually reached the rank of colonel. Stephen married Barbara Barrett, whose family had moved a few generations earlier from England and Scotland to America. Back then, Barbara considered herself mixed since she came from both English and Scottish backgrounds. They were married on the lawn of her prep school, with many members of both the Caples and Barrett families in attendance. Because of his military service, Stephen, Barbara and their two daughters moved around a lot, even living in France for a period. Barbara was a talented artist, and became an accomplished printmaker while raising my mom and my aunt. Eventually Barbara and Stephen settled in Virginia, where they stayed for the rest of their lives. Barbara died of cancer at the age of 85, and Stephen died four years later, after a long fight with Parkinson’s and Alzheimer’s. He became unable to recognize the people who had been close to him. My mom showed him a picture of Barbara, to which he said, “who is she? She’s beautiful.”



My parents' wedding, at Windows on the World (World Trade Center, Tower One, 107th floor)

When people ask me what nationality I am, I usually say Panamanian, to answer the question swiftly and succinctly. The more precise answer has changed over the years: Panamanian and White, Jamaican-Portuguese-Indian and Welsh-Scottish, Caribbean- and Caucasian-American. These days “mixed” or “biracial” are how I see myself, but “Panamanian,” and the Latino associations that come with it, still makes things easiest. “American” is the only completely true answer.

Race is obviously the conversation of the moment. Between our president being a POC, white people on their way to making up less than 50% of our national population, and the widely circulated and viewed videos of police officers abusing and murdering young black people, race is being discussed consistently, visibly and nationally. Within art, identity politics have played a prominent role in many practices for a long time, and sometimes I wonder what the shelf life of overtly identity-based work is. When I was younger, I don't remember thinking about race so much. As I've gotten older, I've found myself more and more consumed by racial issues. In the last few years I've been making work that addresses race, and I feel conflicted about that.

Depending on your perspective, I'm somewhere on the black spectrum. I vary day to day on whether I consider myself black. But even as black or un-black as I am, I'm even less white; I may be half-Caucasian, but that doesn't mean I get to be white. The same is true for our president – even though he's biracial, he's become known as our first black president. In some ways this is great. It exonerates me from some of the standard accusations of privilege that other members of the “millennial creative class” get. It adds a dimension to your story that doesn't exist for white people, given the way we, as a culture, see “white” as “normal”. But it also means that whenever a white colleague declares that they didn't get into a residency or school because they're white, but that you should apply, it means they don't think you deserve what you've earned. It's at best a backhanded compliment. Sometime black issues are interesting to me, sometimes they're boring; maybe that's what it feels like from a white perspective. I'm not sure if race issues interest me on principle, or only when I feel I can relate personally. Sometimes I don't want to hear that shit either. But a lot of times I can't help thinking about it. I haven't been physically abused by a police officer, but the videos still affect me. I'm not sure where the line is between expressing oneself personally or addressing systemic issues, and using race as a crutch within one's work. I suppose the line, like anything else, boils down to whether the work itself is good.



My aunt Stephanie, my mom, and my aunts Esther and Eneida

I read a New York Times Magazine article₁ on DNA testing recently: a self-described *mustefino* (1/16th black) man was affirmed in his identity by finding out he's actually 26% black. I thought that seemed ridiculous. He was striving for inclusion, but didn't define his identity through lived experience. Being 19.75% blacker than he originally thought he was didn't change anything that had happened to him in his life, or the way strangers looked at him, but it changed what he could tell people his heritage was. Instead of saying "I'm 1/16th black", he could now say "I'm 1/4th black". It made me wonder if "struggle" is desirable in 2015. I think there's a strong argument to be made that it is, especially given the plethora of "10 Struggles of Being ____" (insert: short, indecisive, a shoe addict, not fat but not skinny either, in a poopless relationship, etc.,₂) articles in my newsfeed.

The painter Jamian Juliano-Villani recently wrote a short article₃ about being a female painter right now. She felt that to some extent, it was an advantage. I understand what she means; I wouldn't say that being part of a systematically disadvantaged group is an advantage, but I think that she, like many other artists, has been able to turn that systematic disadvantage into a strength. Rap music is largely predicated on narratives of disadvantage, and it has become one of America's strongest cultural exports. I think this is great, but it raises the question of how many stories of struggle and disadvantage can be expressed before one becomes saturated. At the same time, Jamian points out the other end of the spectrum. Even when active within the professional art world, often female and black artists are relegated to all-women or all-black shows, rather than being truly integrated into the gallery system. Data on gallery representation shows a systemic and destructive favoring of white, male artists within the gallery system, and the market. This highlights the failings of identity politics artwork: if those in control (for instance, white male collectors) don't want to see that stuff, it becomes FUBU art, and doesn't produce any actual change. Then again, maybe an artist's work doesn't have to produce change; maybe self-expression is enough.

1: Mat Johnson, "Proving My Blackness," from the May 19th, 2015 issue of the New York Times Magazine

2: These are all real articles

3: "Jamian Juliano-Villani Responds" from the June 2015 issue of ARTnews



My grandmothers, Vida (left) and Barbara (right)

This year, for various reasons, I've been riding the subway through long stretches of the five boroughs. I live near Prospect Park, and there have been a couple of times I've found myself on the 2 train headed to the Bronx and back again. I watch the race of the passengers change over the course of the ride. For all of its diversity, New York is a segregated city. I have white friends who, upon moving to black and Hispanic neighborhoods, have said they think they come off as Hispanic to the neighborhood residents, or at least somewhat want to. This shifted identity is a way to comfort themselves from the inescapable reality of systematic gentrification, but I think it's interesting that for them, being white and comparatively wealthy (but not wealthy enough to live in a white neighborhood) is a disadvantage, or at least a source of guilt. Conversely, I have family members who I would say are black, but choose to highlight the "Latinoness" of their identity, because they find it preferential to identifying as black. This builds into colonialist structures of race – the lighter skinned you were, the better. On both ends of this odd American race spectrum, from black to white, Hispanic gets used as a false (or at least incomplete) way to self-identify, to avoid the harsher realities of being white and black. As mixed relationships continue to increase, race is becoming more and more amalgamated, and the constructs of race become increasingly malleable. Brown is a color that can result from many different combinations; maybe there will be a point where no one knows what anyone is just by looking at them. But right now, a cursory look at the comments on a Cheerios commercial on YouTube will let you know clearly and definitively that racism is alive and well₄.

4: "Cheerios Commercial Featuring Mixed Race Family Gets Racist Backlash", Braden Goyette for the Huffington Post, May 31st, 2013: "An adorable Cheerios commercial featuring an interracial couple and their daughter generated such a strong racist backlash on YouTube that the comments section had to be closed."

On the 2010 census I checked off Caucasian and Hispanic.
In 2020, I don't think I'll be checking off the same boxes.





