

Tiffany, age eleven

Birmingham, Alabama

AS TOLD TO REBECCA CARROLL

What I'd like to say to black girls in America is that it's okay to be who they are and to express what they want to express. And what I'd like to say to white people in America is that I am not offended by their prejudices; if they want to presume that I am offended, then I'm going to presume that it is not my responsibility to educate them in any sort of detail.

My neighborhood is black. I've lived in white neighborhoods, too, and I've been the only black girl in a crowd of white kids. But I've never seen any reason to feel bad about it. There's nothing to feel bad about. In fact, I feel kind of special when I'm the only one. I feel like it's me against the world. I think it's silly to try and look for an experience that has made me feel different or has made me think that my struggle is harder than white people's struggle. You just gotta know who you are, and if you don't know, you can't look anywhere else but inside yourself.

For me, it is very important to have black friends. I have one good, close black friend at school. I also have white friends, but the fact is, if we are talking about something that might be considered "black," like a certain rap group or the language a rap group might use, my white friends are not going to understand, which is fine; they don't have to. Everyone is so upset that black people and white people don't all eat, sleep, and breathe the same everything, but if we did, we'd be in big trouble. I don't feel like I have to explain something like rap music to my white friends. If they want to listen to it, too, that's all right, but I don't



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know why they would think that I need to or can explain what it's like to listen to rap music or how I feel about it. And you know they'll ask, too. They'll say, "What is rap music all about?" What am I gonna tell them? Well, it has good beats.

I'm not defensive about the music I listen to and I don't really have a theory about it. But I have seen some videos on television that make me wonder about some of the music I listen to, like Snoop Doggy Dogg.¹ I think he's crazy offensive and I really don't understand why any woman would actually agree to be in his videos knowing that they're going to be exploited like they are. I don't want or need those women to be role models for me, but they do need to think about what they're doing to

¹ **Snoop Doggy Dogg**: a rap singer (now known as Snoop Dogg) who is controversial because of the violence and sexism of his lyrics and his brushes with the law

themselves and the message they are sending to young people. It's a shame, but if you are black in this society and you have the opportunity to be in front of millions of people, you need to pay attention to what you're doing and how you're doing it, especially if you are a female. It's bad enough that everything on the news talks about black females always being pregnant and on welfare. What's the difference between that and the black females actin' a fool in Snoop Doggy Dogg's videos?

The school I'm at now is good. I went to a much bigger and more diverse school before starting at this one. It hasn't been the easiest transition, but I'm doing all right. I know it's a good opportunity for me. I like my classes and have some good teachers. I like science best, partly because I have a good teacher who takes the time to explain something if I don't understand and partly because I love that science is all about discovery. We do fun and exciting things in class, like go on scavenger hunts where we have to find and identify certain kinds of plants and stuff. I haven't decided what I want to be when I grow up. It's too early, I think, but I know I want to do something that involves discovering ideas and inventing things.

There are no black teachers at my school. The only black adults are the custodians. And that does have an impact on the students, I think. It would be nice to have even one black teacher at the school so that students, both black and white, could see that black people can be teachers, too and not just custodians. And also I think it would be important for the black students to be taught from the perspective of a black adult, not necessarily because there is a "black" way of teaching, but I know that it would be nice to feel like a teacher is talking to me and in some way understanding how I feel about certain things.

I'm not as concerned with black history as I am with black present. I think about black history sometimes, but I feel like it's more important to have the present be good for us. I don't have to think about black history to feel proud. I am *proud* today. I have a really solid family, which I feel lucky about. My mom is the kind of woman who cares a lot about people but doesn't ever go so far as to lose sight of herself. My dad and I are really close. He's a fireman. I haven't gone with him to any fires yet, but I think I will one day. I worry about him sometimes, but then I'll sit down and have a talk with him and feel better. We can talk about anything. He's always there for me. I think his most admirable quality is that he's weird. You know, he's not afraid to do anything at all—I mean anything. He is really fearless.

I have one older brother and he goes to a larger, more diverse school than the school I go to. I think being black means something different for boys than it does for girls. I think for boys everything rides on being tough and being cool. And being cool doesn't include hanging out with white people at all, as in the thought doesn't even fit into the picture. Somehow it seems like black girls can be more comfortable around white people. I don't know why, although I'm sure there's a reason. I just know that there are real serious pressures for black boys in society today and I try not to mess with it too much.

I have close white girlfriends at school. They're close, but not *real* close. There is a fine line between close and real close, but I guess what it really comes down to is trust. And see, it's the same with the way I feel about being black: I don't think about it; I just *know*. With my white friends, I don't think about being close or real close, I just know that there is a difference between being close and real close. For example, I take karate, and I am the only black girl in the class. See, I don't feel like an outcast because I'm pretty good at karate. But then again, one time I was at a karate tournament and I scored the highest on my team as well as against the other team. But the first-place trophy was given to another girl on my team who was white. I was mad, but it's almost like I know things like this are going to happen and it takes a lot of courage to keep getting up and moving on. When you just know things, there isn't a whole lot of time or really much use in trying to figure out why they are what they are.

I claim the right to be Tiffany and Tiffany is many things. I claim the right to play basketball, study science, do karate, listen to rap music, love my parents, be as loud as I please, and have an attitude that separates me from everyone else. My attitude can be all that or real chill, but whatever it is, it's mine. And if anyone has a problem with that, they can speak to me directly. ☺