

I lie awake in my bedroom staring at the white ceiling that glows in the moonlight.
I can hear the rustling of the blooming leaves from the trees of my backyard as the cool summer breeze travels throughout the night.
“I can’t wait to finally go to college,” I think.

“Chapel Hill just feels like home.”
“The people here are like family.”
“You’re going to want to cherish every moment you’re here.”
These are truths I’ve been convinced.

Excitement tingles my body as I consider anything more I can pack before the 15 hour car ride from my suburban home in Long Island, New York, to the new home I will make in North Carolina.
I sit up out of bed and the old, wooden bed frame creaks throughout the silent house.
As I do every night, I take two short steps over to the only window in the room, and pry it open while trying not to flake off any more of the shedding white paint.
I my head out into refreshing summer air.

I attempt to remember the scene as vividly as I can—the delicately trimmed vibrant green grass my dog invades each morning, the eroded wooden deck where my brother and I have splintered our feet countless times, and the tilted, and molded basketball hoop that embraced many Friday after-school memories with friends; all enclosed by the stereotypical American white picket fence.
My bedroom window is by far my favorite part of the town I grew up in; it gives me the opportunity to connect with and appreciate the nature and memories that have made my life in New York so memorable.

I’m sprawled out on the backseat of my family’s mini van.
The different suitcases, shoes, and college school supplies rumble in the trunk.
My dad’s 70s Rock music plays quietly as he has his gaze set intently on the road and my mom’s NPR podcast can be heard through her earbuds while she’s fast asleep.
I roll down the window half way and feel the warm Virginia air flood the car.
I can’t quiet embrace the beauty of the bright orange setting peaking over the mountains as I’m forced to close the window because the turbulent noise might wake my mom.
“Five more hours to go,” I think as the humming of the car along the seemingly empty driveway puts me to sleep.

I didn’t sleep my first few nights at UNC.
My suite, composed of seven other excited guys, and living hall, composed of all party-crazed freshmen was a recipe for constant noise.
You can hear the muffled rap music through the white brick walls from the room to our left, my suitemates banging on the door to our single bathroom throughout the night, and student running down the halls above and below our room, all harmonizing with the constant sound of running water traveling throughout the pipes in our room.

However, the sounds that keep me up at night are not from the activity and livelihood of my living community.

They are the sounds that remind me that this so-called “family” of UNC students is not one that I am very welcomed to.

I remember walking down Franklin Street, arms full of groceries as I head back to my dorm.

A box of Cinnamon Toast Crunch falls from one of my bags and, as I reach to pick it up, a group of drunk college boys kick it off the sidewalk and into the road.

They walk away with smirks on their faces and one of them yells back “Go back where you came from chink!”

They roar in laughter and continue to walk away.

I go into the street to recover the box of cereal and trudge back to my dorm, defeated.

I lie awake in my bedroom staring at the eroded brick ceiling that glows in the moonlight.

I can hear my suitemates mocking the culture of my people in the adjacent room as they burst out into laughter.

“I can’t wait to finally go home,” I think.

My window is closed and, sadly, I now like it this way.

Chapel Hill is not home.

Family members do not discriminate one another by the color of their skin.

The intense racism makes me want to completely forget some of my time here.

These are the truths I have discovered.

The racial divide and discrimination between individuals of North Carolina breeds a toxic culture.

Racial profiling, racial targeting, and racial slurs continue to polarize UNC culture and degrade our unity as a community.

I don’t enjoy opening my window anymore.

The air I breathe no longer reminds me of great memories, but of how my race is an indication of my social acceptance.

I cannot enjoy the cool breeze of the night.

But I can keep my window closed and let the heat build up inside.

People who believe that fighting off racist slurs will change the culture of discrimination also believe that opening a window can change the warming climate.

Like most problems, the solution runs much deeper than the individual.

The world does not have to be this mess of tribalistic division.

Our culture, especially in Chapel Hill, must be more racially accepting and understanding than the admission process makes it.

This “home” that many students choose to make UNC can be quite regrettable, and this house divided cannot stand for much longer.

Student activism has worked to open the window, not only for me, but for all future students of UNC. The racism that persists in our University's culture is matched with acts of heroism and bravery to eradicate our nation's dark history of discrimination and build from a more inclusive platform.

I remember witnessing the great fall of Silent Sam.

The commands of the policemen were inaudible over the chants of the protestors to push down the confederate statue

Sirens wailed down Franklin Street, and newscasters and cameramen were desperately trying to set up shop to capture the historic moment.

The sound of heavy metal clashing into the dirt resonated throughout all of Chapel Hill and is one that I will never forget.

Police dogs started to temper the riot as protestors walked away victoriously.

I slept with my window wide open that night.

The sounds of excited students proclaiming they have made history echoed throughout the night, and for the first time since coming to Chapel Hill I felt that I was seen for more than my race.

I believe we have taken the first steps to making meaningful change in our community.

It will take time, but persisting towards a more welcoming environment will encourage students, like myself, to open the window and appreciate the beauty that our culture and people truly hold, and I know we will be the better for it.