

**WRITING**

# Racial Autobiography

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MSP

**TYPE**

MEMOIR  
NARRATIVE

**GENRE**

GRADES 9–12

When I was in preschool, we learned colors. We learned about vibrant yellow, mellow blue, fierce red, grassy green, passionate purple, chocolatey brown, and fiery orange. When we talked about shades, we talked about the purest white, the murky gray, and finally, the fear-instilling black. After that lesson, I decided that black was my least favorite color. Black was the color of nightmares that you can't seem to wake up from. Black was the color of fears you couldn't outgrow. Black was the color of death and sorrow. Black was the color of the darkness of abandonment. Any color was better than black. After I learned my colors, I was so excited to show everyone the colors that I now knew. Water was blue, the trees were green, the stop signs were red, and I was brown.

I was telling my friends about my newfound understanding of colors during lunchtime. I pulled my PB&J sandwich out from my little pink backpack and took a big bite before describing the color of

everything in sight. To me, the world was so vibrant and colorful and I was glad to be a part of it. I was proud to be such a beautiful and earthy color. My skin became something precious to me. The friend who sat closest decided it would be fun to play a game where we guessed what something was based on the given color. I thought I was clever when I said brown—no one would be able to guess it. I revealed the answer because, as I predicted, everyone was stumped. When I told them I was brown, a certain curly-headed friend stopped me.

“You’re Black,” she said this with pure conviction, as though it were a fact that everyone knew. I insisted that I was brown, not black; I knew I had not learned my colors incorrectly. In winter, my skin was brown like caramel that you put on top of ice cream that you still eat even when it’s snowing outside. In summer, my skin was darkened by the summer like the lucky penny you found on the scorching sidewalk. You see, I knew my colors well. I knew the difference between black and brown, I hadn’t confused them. But I didn’t tell her this. Instead I told her to apologize for calling me a color that didn’t signify anything good. I would have rather been blue or purple or green. How could I be the color of so many scary things?

“You are Black, and he,” as she pointed to our peach-colored friend, “is White.” It was very obvious to me at this point that my friend had learned her colors incorrectly. How could our friend possibly be White? He looked like neither paper nor the fluffy snow

that was coating the ground. If anything, he was pink and then red when he threw his tantrums. Had she learned her colors incorrectly? Or was I missing something? I moved away from her and sat by myself until it was time to go home.

When I was getting picked up from school, I told my mom what my friend had said. My mom looked at me for a long second before laughing lightly.

“You’re right. You are brown, “ she said with teasing in her voice. I did not understand what her laughing meant then, but I do now.

Now that I’m older, I’ve had to come to terms with my Blackness. The color black was no longer something I could afford to hate. My status as a Black person was more important than it was when I was a kid. I walk around and the first thing people see about me is my Blackness. I’ve realized I can’t escape from my Blackness, and most recently I’ve been forced to face it head-on.

George Floyd was murdered by a police officer on May 25, 2020. After his death, it was as if an alarm went off in Minneapolis telling people to take to the streets in protest. Our city looked like that of a warzone for a while. The world was watching our boring little state, and were all looking for some kind of change. Being forced to acknowledge that “Minnesota Nice” is just passive-aggressive racism was one of the biggest epiphanies resulting from the protests. You could see that our city would never be the same. But,

along with the protest came a different kind of racism.

Everyone was trying to prove they were not racist. Even celebrities did this, putting on fake tears and raising a fist for Black power while on the inside they were celebrating the fame and publicity they got from “supporting” Black people. Many began using the name of a dead man as a way to gain more fans and support. There were even cases of celebrities taking photos at protests and showing off how much money they had donated to Black Lives Matter. There was money to be made from supporting Black people, and many milked it for all it was worth.

Some people were walking on eggshells around Black people; these people saw us on the street and their first instinct was to prove they weren’t racist or that they supported the “cause.” The fires burning on Lake Street were a cool breeze in comparison to the scorching hot gazes of people on the street. Suddenly going on walks became suffocating and talking to my White neighbors felt patronizing. Sadly, school was not much better. I’d have teachers tell me about how much they love Black people and support the movement (not explicitly, of course). I am still unsure if they were telling me of if they were trying to convince themselves. One of the responses that irritated me was when people would apologize to me and ask if I needed any emotional support.

While George Floyd’s death was tragic, it shouldn’t just be tragic to me because I’m Black. I firmly believe that as a human it should be tragic to see a fellow human die in

such a horrible way. It felt like I was expected to give out the mystical “not racist” approval stamp. It was as if we were in court and I somehow became the judge of whether or not the White people I knew were racist or not. Many people were just trying to prevent the destruction of their property, and that meant “appeasing” the Black people.

Looking back, the media was doing their best to ignore the issue of George Floyd’s murder and instead focus on the destruction of cities. It was almost as if they wanted to make it look like Black people and other protestors were in the wrong. From that moment on, I realized that as a Black person I would always be looked at negatively even when I was trying to do good. Standing up for myself was overly aggressive, and saying nothing was suspicious or intimidating. And though I had long acknowledged that Black is not a color—if I had kept seeing my Blackness as the color I abhorred as a child—I knew I would come to hate myself.

I had to find new meanings for Black. Black is now the color of the infamous card of limitless spending. Black is now the color of power and social standing. Black is now the color of a mysterious future I have yet to explore. Black is now the color of the elegant black dresses worn by Michelle Obama. Black is now more than the nightmares I feared of the darkness I still cower away from. I now acknowledge that Black is a mixture of all the colors, and while it sometimes may seem grim, there’s always

something good within its depths.

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This piece was published in *Rehumanize Me: A Black Youth Anthology* (2022).

*Rehumanize Me* is a collection of poems, essays, and other creative works by 14 young Black authors from Minneapolis, brought to you by 826 MSP.