

I thought I was going to die this winter in South Africa.

In July 2021, protests began in my country. Main roads were set alight as, over the following days, ethnic protests spiralled into mass looting and arson. Filling in my Common Application while stuck in a town that had recently been ransacked, two hours away from home, wasn't what I originally had in mind for the holidays.

In attempts to maintain our modern-day racial peace, South Africa performs this balancing act of maintaining the status quo, ensuring the comfort of the privileged whilst doling out rights and representation to the marginalised. Growing up privileged in South Africa led to me having little interaction with black people outside of my family because of the legacy of Apartheid. My majority-white hometown, Umhlanga, is still like a European country brimming with diverse tourism. The fancy restaurants and schools are filled with white people, while black people are either working or feeling like "intruders in their own land", as Craig Higginson once said.

When I was eight years old, I thought I was white because I had gumption, was smarter, and more polite than any black person that I saw. However, my reflection claimed otherwise. It was after a long day at the pool, getting burnt by the South African sun, when I was forced to accept that my white palms did not reflect the rest of my skin colour. My ability to ignore my internal contradictions was compromised until the dark tan faded. However, this July, I was forced to reflect on my perception of black people to understand the fear of the protestors.

As a child, I wanted to be a storyteller, but in the stories I read and watched, black characters either contributed to negative stereotypes or were entirely absent. Furthermore, the news had conditioned me to be afraid of poor black South Africans, and I struggled to see the humanity in all black people. I didn't want to be black because I refused to be associated with the dehumanised images from the media that had seeped into my subconscious like chlorine. I resorted to writing about my shame in secret.

The protests were an inevitable build-up of a failing economy and racial tensions that the country had worked so hard to avoid addressing. During our three days on the road, we listened to the radio for updates while we drove past kids carrying food from looted stores. I closed my eyes to escape the scenes around me and opened them again to see a group of looters surrounding the car. They demanded money, but my mom begged for them to let her pass. Something in them changed as she spoke, as they heard her story of trying to get back home with her kids. I saw in their eyes our shared fear for our families, our shared tiredness, and our shared humanity.

When I got home, something clicked. I couldn't stop reading and writing about my blackness. It was in my poems that I performed at a Heritage Day event, in my essay about African poetry that won 1st place, in the books that I have been buying since, and in the story that I am currently writing.

Once I stopped denying my authenticity to make others feel more comfortable around me, I realised that I can carve out as much room as I want in this world with my pen. I am eighteen and black, and I now know that eight-year-old me deserved to know the power of feeling proud.

The black people that surrounded the car that day deserve to have their rights uncompromised. I cannot stop writing. I have to write and film the stories that the media refuses to tell, stories that demonstrate the humanity of all black people, regardless of what they do, and stories that critique the unjust system we live in.