
Writing While Black: a Journey of Self-Love

Sarah Keeton

Sarah Keeton is a Black, Queer, Poly, Trans, Fat, Neuro-divergent, and college educated person. They are a black witch, an Aries, and a truth-teller. Sarah views writing as a liberatory, lifesaving practice. They are passionate about people, learning, and healing. Sarah grounds their purpose and pursuit for justice in love and community. Sarah was born and raised in the Midwest and has briefly lived abroad and in the Pacific Northwest. They received their undergrad in Sociology & Gender Studies. They recently finished their Master's degree in Interdisciplinary Studies with an emphasis in Critical Pedagogy and Communication. In the fall they are excited to pursue their PhD at Arizona State University in Communication.

*[This] writing saves me from this complacency, I fear. Because I have no choice. Because I must keep the spirit of my revolt and myself alive. Because the world I create in the writing compensates for what the real world does not give me. By writing I put order in the world, give it a handle so I can grasp it. I write because life does not appease my appetites and hunger. **I write to record what others erase when I speak [emphasis added], to rewrite the stories others have miswritten about me, about you. To become more intimate with myself and you. To discover myself, to preserve myself, to make myself, to achieve self-autonomy . . . to convince myself I am worthy [emphasis added] and that what I have to say is not a pile of shit** (Anzaldúa, 2005, p. 169).*

I am black, queer, transfemme, fat, and light skinned. I am a sibling, advocate, educator, learner, friend, and auntie. These are my ways of knowing, of being, of feeling, of living, of breathing, of surviving. And they are all at once created, negotiated, dismantled, and transformed at the site of my body. These identities and commitments shape how I interact with the world and how the world interacts with me.

somehow the stars aligned and i found myself signing up for another semester of master-level courses. i am still not sure how i got here, but my friends would tell me it is because of my own hard work and dedication. i still lean on the truth of opportunity. sure, ~~i am smart, but all the odds were stacked against me and my "achievement", my ability to navigate the system, does little for the black bodies who are kept out of the classroom.~~ see above, me relying on sarcasm and self-deprecation to dismiss my accomplishments, to dismiss myself, a tactic i learned from ideological systems of whiteness, patriarchy, colonialism, and hegemony. Systems that mark my body as inferior, illogical, and incompetent; systems that taught me to loathe my body; systems that define radical black self-love as a laughable, impossible concept.



Abstract

In this critical personal narrative Keeton explores how identity is negotiated at the site of their Black, queer body. They use autoethnography as a method to record their lived experiences in the context of the social, cultural, and political world. This writing explores their experiences with the education system and how their identities and experiences have influenced how they interact with the world, their perception of self, and their relationship with writing. Through critical reflection, Keeton describes how embodying an ethic of love and experiencing supportive role models within the education system allowed them to resist racist indoctrination and find their way to embodying healing and black self-love.

KEY WORDS

Black self-love, Black feminist autoethnography, queer, resistance, complex identity

what i really thought was:

"i can't believe i am here"

"this can't be real"

"why me?"

"you're going to fuck this up"

After the year I had, after the life I had, how am I, Sarah Keeton, still in Idaho, still signing up for courses, ~~still pursuing a goal well beyond my means~~ still subjecting myself to dismissal, erasure, and violence? still trying to fit in and ~~feels~~ change an institution that so clearly doesn't want me. still trying to prove my worth.

my ability to reproduce white academic discourse, in my light-skinned black body, meant i ~~approximated~~ tried on, and wore like a second skin, white-supremacist standards in a way the education system not only embraced but also greatly rewarded. I was rewarded with access to whiteness and white accolades, every "job well done" from Becky, every 4.0 GPA, every acknowledgment and approval of my body. I longed for markers of whiteness and cherished them when they were bestowed upon me. i shifted, and contorted, and abhorred my blackness. i rejected my kinky curls; i longed for straight hair, quite literally burning my scalp to perform "good" hair. i longed to blend, to fit, to be seen as one of. even though i gritted my teeth at "i am almost as dark as you!" even though i clenched my jaw at "but you're white on the inside!" never quite fitting. never quite seen. somewhere in between.

still.

not.

white.

enough.

and never black enough.

never good enough.

Each identity impacts how I express myself in different ways. The more I move through each identity, the more I accept, celebrate, and cherish the beautiful intersections of me, the more my identities ebb and flow within each other to create the how of my embodied practices, create the how of my movement through the world.

after my first brutal semester at an institution 50 years behind, in a red state, i dreaded signing up for courses. my experience in higher education has been a lot of me going through the motions, learning on my own, and trying to suppress my black rage from

the ignorant white folks around me. suffice to say i was not excited about taking another course, where i would have to bite my tongue and contain my rage at the erasure that was bound to happen in the classroom. but i had a degree to complete and my options were limited. this degree mattered to me. it was my ticket out and up. this is why i left direct service, a never-ending job of offering Band-Aids to people wrecked with bullet holes.

my people.

black,

brown,

poor,

survivors.

i wanted more for them. i wanted more for me.

my indoctrination into an educational system played a major component in erasing me, my identity, and shaping me into a black person who **performs** whiteness well. i have always been intelligent. Reading, writing and theoretical thought excited me, and I often excelled (not only by white standards of straight As and GPA but also as someone who found validation, recognition, and invigoration in these practices). academia was an outlet. it boosted my self-worth and gave me purpose. i had a dysfunctional, chaotic, and trauma-filled upbringing. school, extracurricular activities, the hopes of escaping to college, escaping menial jobs, doing better for myself offered three things:

1. approval—in a world where my self-worth was shit;
2. purpose, distraction—in a world where going home meant violence and lonely nights;
3. a pathway—in a world where i desperately needed to prove to myself and everyone else that i mattered. that i was better than my parents, better than poor, better than black, better than them.

little did i know i was trading one system of violence (family) for another (education). well, not trading exactly, you never can really leave either one. but education gave me a sense of control, a space for approval, consistent rules I could memorize, follow, and chances to hear a "job well done."

so, i learned the rules.

shrinking myself.

shapeshifting.

putting on a smile (politeness).

straightening my hair (whiteness).

crushing on boys and pretending not to kiss girls (straightness).

sitting still. quiet. swallowing curiosity. performing linear thinking. high heels. dresses. taylor swift. razor cell phones. individualism. work to be the best. no, better. despising rap music. cringing at my large, loud, black dad. dieting. conforming. (colonialness, cisness, femaleness, antiblackness). Abhorring and rejecting

every.

last.

part.

of my identity,

nothing to love here.

As a young, light-skinned, black woman I learned to communicate politely and without question. As a sibling and advocate, I learned to assert myself with intention and interrogation. As a poor child, living in dysfunction, I learned to communicate with vigilance and empathy. As I got older, my queerness taught me to embody joy, fluidity, and fierceness. As an educator and learner, I learned to engage with infinite curiosity and wisdom. Feminism, Womanism, Black fat Instagram models, reading theory, reading myself, (re)finding my voice, and writing myself—with love, with accurate representation, with role models, I found my way to loving my Blackness, to loving my queerness, to loving my fat body, to loving all the parts of me I was taught to abhor.

despite my best judgement, i signed up for a course with a white male professor i already knew to have pompous, white, big-dick energy.

you know the type.

turned on by the sound of his own voice

every word a wonderous gift from his mouth to your ears

“oh, you have lived experience? that’s cute. I have a PhD.”

the higher ed ~~experts~~ folks around me insisted this course would aid in my growth as a student and a scholar. five minutes into class, my gut was screaming at me, my head was screaming at me, my heart was screaming at me, “YOU. WERE. RIGHT.” you can’t trust white folks; you can’t trust higher ed ~~experts~~ folks to understand what it really means to have **your black body erased in front of your very eyes**. the anger, the rage, the betrayal of a ~~well-educated expert~~ teacher avoiding the word “black,” refusing to name “people of color,” evading the “race issue.” i sat in my chair,

baffled, **even though i knew better**, i sat in my chair, devastated, **even though i knew better**, i sat in my chair, enraged, **even though I knew better**. i sat, shaking my head at the willful racism and violence taking place in front of my very eyes. i sat, overcome with shame, as i witnessed the fragile white faces looking around nervously, anticipating my black rage. i paced around my living room, yelling at the top of my lungs to my sister-in-law and brother about the white bullshit before my very eyes. i thought to myself, **there is no way** i am going to tolerate another semester of this violence, this erasure. **there is no way** i am going to go through another semester of having to bring race into the room while the white faces around me look shocked, fragile, and apologetic for their willful ignorance and participation in racist indoctrination. there is no way i am going to tolerate another semester of whiteness tearing down my self-esteem and silencing my loud, black, angry voice.

despite the recommendations from the higher ed folks telling me to stick out the course, telling me that maybe walking through *this* fire will teach me something different—YO I’VE WALKED THROUGH ENOUGH FIRE DON’T YOU THINK—i am covered in third-degree burns. scarring after scarring, still blistering from the fire i just walked through. i don’t need to walk through another fire to know it hurts to get burned.

It’s time for me to heal.

Now as my life experiences come together and I become more sure of who I am and what I value, I am able to express myself in manners that feel authentic to who I am. I am still policed by the hegemonic normativity around me. It still finds ways to chip away at my sense of self. But my scars, my support system, and my intuition always lead me back to my embodied, loving self.

i enrolled in another course. the professor was recommended to me, as an ally. i remember breathing a sigh of relief at the online nature of the course. i remember sitting shocked at the professor stating she was happy to provide an alternative to discussion groups if they wouldn’t work for me. i remember thinking no, i can sit through a discussion group, ~~i can tolerate a little more abuse~~. i am not going to let white folks have proof of another thing my black body cannot do. i remember being pleasantly surprised by the critical nature of the readings, being pleasantly surprised at the nature of the discussion groups. i remember feeling relieved at the eager-to-learn ignorance of my peers, as it was a nice reprieve from willful ignorance and disregard. I remember feeling delightfully surprised i wasn’t being erased (only tokenized and exploited, i later realized). **the bar was on the floor**. There is a nuance here not many will understand. I was relieved; I was eager; I was hopeful. But, once again, I was trading one form of violence for another.

this course took place smack dab in the middle of quarantine. i had left the red state and returned home. i was surrounded by family, and i was seeing a new queer therapist who was also a

person of color. i was reading bell hooks, *All About Love*. I didn't have to leave my house; I wasn't surrounded by whiteness all day, every day. I didn't have to deal with the daily onslaught of micro-aggressions. I felt relief in so many parts of my body I hadn't even realized held tension. My sense of self was being validated in new ways. As my self-esteem grew and I began to trust myself more, my capacity to suffer through, grin and bear it, bite my tongue and accommodate white folks waned.

as the weeks dragged on, i participated less and less in discussion. i began to recognize the subtleties in this new form of violence. i grew weary of the performative reading material, diverse by author but used as ethnographic research to sharpen white "cultural competence" skills. i grew weary of rearranging the discussion and reflection questions designed to propel white racial consciousness. i grew weary from the "white aha moments" that were known truths of my black body. i grew weary of the eager-to-learn faces, waiting to soak up my knowledge, my truths, my lived experiences, reap the benefits of my emotional labor. i logged off after one class and said to my sister-in-law, "dang, i should be getting teaching assistant credit." i grew weary that whiteness was still being centered and we had yet to dive deep into the material in a way that felt new and exciting and thought provoking, to me.

Assigned writing-reflection question:

"How has Whiteness as a discourse circumscribed your experience as a writer?"

The better question would be, how hasn't whiteness circumscribed my experience as a writer? disregarded by yet another course assignment

that.

wasn't.

meant.

for.

me.

as a person living in a black body, my experiences of writing have been completely otherized by whiteness. whiteness has tightened, restricted, stifled, boxed, choked, and violently erased my voice, the very essence of who i am, from my writing.

And although I still encountered harm in this course, and although whiteness was still centered in this course, I still found respite, I still found healing, I still found allyship, and I (re)learned that my voice mattered. one particular, racist-hate-filled thursday, i emailed my teacher:

"I'm too tired to attend class today, it is too white for me."

my professor responded with grace and compassion,

"yes, take care of yourself."

After this exchange my professor reached out to offer me alternative assignments:

"i am genuinely sorry that you have been bearing the weight of mustering energy to engage in class discussions, and I don't want you to expend energy on that which does not nurture your intellect and personhood."

wow. WOW. wow. never had i read such words. never had i been honored in such a way. never had i experienced an educator saying, i am sorry, i haven't been seeing you, i haven't been facilitating a space for your learning. this professor gave me the space to push back, to challenge, to say hey, your reflection questions are not for me. hey, your discussion questions are not for me. and empowered me to ask, **how can i learn?**

because my learning matters too.

my learning matters period.

This professor provided me space to reflect, critique, and question the hegemonic standards that had been cruelly distorting my sense of self. As i am able to reflect back, i am realizing how performing whiteness affected my writing in profound ways. i was taught that writing was a tool:

- a tool to communicate clear, concise, ideas: productive, obedient, regurgitative;
- a tool to regurgitate the information someone more powerful and smarter than you gave you to remember;
- a tool to illustrate you understood your role, your place, and what it was you were supposed to learn;
- a tool to get tasks done, a means to an end.

And the most egregious thing i was taught, the most violent thing, the most devastating heartbreaking thing whiteness taught me about writing was what it did not teach me.

it did not teach me.

whiteness did not teach me writing was a tool of liberation. whiteness took that tool from me. it stole it from me. it violently erased that fact from my memory, from my essence. it made me forget a truth as natural as breathing air. and now. as i am able to center my learning, as i am able to nurture my growth, as i am able to ask

critical questions and utilize writing to record myself, my story, my truth, i find healing. i find empowerment. i find refuge.

am i creating chaos?
 doomed to repeat the ghosts of christmas past?
 what am i avoiding?
 what am i fleeing?
 shedding the inheritance of
 restrict
 produce
 stifle
 shrink
 erase
 deny
 erase
 my body, my essence
 grew weary
 ragged from the angst
 tattered from the torrential downpour of
 white. right. straight. pass. fit. blend. hold your tongue.
 you will find pieces of me scattered around ivory towers
 my blood splattered on classroom walls
 my bone smatterings discarded on classroom floors
 stupefied by ideological complicity
 obliterated by hegemonic expectations
 and still
 i rise
 from the chaos
 from the ashes
 from the debris of what should be
 a fledgling
 clumsy
 ready
 flying towards
 freedom
 possibility
 the promise of
 it is not now or never,
 it is now and always

writing, in all its forms, is a lifeforce.

it gives voice.

it gives power.

it gives room to process.

it holds space.

it doesn't have to be anything more or less than your imagination,

than your wildest dreams,

than your deepest thoughts,

than your biggest fears.

whiteness fucking stole that from me.

but,

i have taken

it back.

and now,

every word is for me, every sentence is for me, every piece of writing is for me.

to return to myself, to love myself, to show to myself and the world

that I am worthy, I am love.

my life matters.

the way I exist in the world matters.

I am black,

I am queer,

I am transfemme,

I am fat

I am light skinned.

I am a sibling,

I am an advocate,

I am an educator,

I am a learner,

I am a friend,

I am an auntie.

These are my ways of knowing, of being, of feeling, of living, of breathing, of surviving, of thriving.

And I am valid. I am true. And I am whole.

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