

Chapter 7

Journey Through the Self



Chelsea Nyomi Richards

7.1 My Reflection

At times, I stare at myself and think about what other people see when they see me. My thoughts envelop me until I don't see anything that I like. I am happy to be me until I meet someone who says something, or does something, that makes me feel out of place, and then my immediate reaction is - I wish I could be different, somehow. But when I think about changing myself, and what I would change, I don't want to change anything. This constant state of flux - wanting to be different but not wanting to actually change - has torn me both mentally and emotionally. So, for example, I question myself and my appearance with more scrutiny when I've had an unpleasant encounter. I notice the way people tense up around me when I am alone with them in an elevator. Do I look threatening, I begin to wonder? I feel sad when I meet someone for the first time, either in person or on Zoom, and they seem surprised that I am Black. What were they expecting? Do I not meet your expectations? I almost ask them, but I never do.

After many micro-aggressions, macro-aggressions, and other subtle insults that appear to be targeted towards my Blackness, I've dressed myself in protective armour. But this so-called armour hasn't exactly protected me, instead, it has prevented me from reacting. I am still negatively affected but I cannot seem to respond with any presence of mind. For instance, I have never 'lashed out' even on the rare occasion that I wanted to. These aggressions though, and all those unsaid thoughts inside me, collectively chip away at my confidence, and sadly, they end up impacting my interactions with others. I find myself becoming more skeptical and non-trusting, and I may even have become a bit delusional, creating narratives from a stunted glance, a change in body language, or the slightest adjustment in intonation.

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Sometimes, I don't even know if it's really happening outside of me, or if it's just ruminating inside my head...

One thing is finally clear though - I don't actually want to change, I just want to go unnoticed, or instead, not be noticed for being Black. Some of the most troubling experiences that resulted in how I perceive myself have been because of my hair, my Blackness, and my Jamaican ancestry. I've dedicated this story to those experiences.

7.2 Thick 4c Hair

I long to visit Jamaica again, the birthplace of my parents. I vaguely remember myself on my first visit 'home', a rambunctious toddler at age 3, climbing that mango tree in my grandparents' frontyard. I was eager to pet a donkey at a petting zoo, a donkey in a bad mood as it turned out, that gently kicked me in my stomach. I was fascinated by the small lizards that roamed throughout the yard and into the home. Another memory is of my hair being braided by a Jamaican hairdresser. She told me to sit still so that I could have an even hairdo, but it was hard to sit still for what seemed like so long. Looking back now, some 22 years later, she was quick, but I was fidgety and I definitely didn't like the feeling of my hair being tugged, twisted, and cornrowed.

My mother, a Jamaican native herself who immigrated to Canada during her late teens, never learned to cornrow (fashionably), and I was therefore never subjected to having my hair styled that way as a child. Instead, my mother styled my hair in thick, single braids using scrunchies or "bubbles" to secure the braids tightly to my scalp. They were often referred to as "doo-doo plaits" by those who looked down on the hairstyle, or those who were attempting to attack Black culture. In 6th grade, someone even said to me "your hair looks like penises". Another said my hairstyle looked like long pieces of poo. When I got home, I told my mom that I was being teased at school, and I asked her to make the plaits smaller. She gave me a hairstyle with many small single braids, each secured by a small scrunchie. I went to school the next day with the feeling that I would dodge the negative comments, instead, I was told that my hair looked like spider legs.

As I grew older, I was eager to straighten my hair to avoid being teased about my hairstyle. My hair is very thick, and it doesn't stay straight for long, especially with intense humidity. The first time I straightened my hair was in 7th grade, I wanted to look 'nice' for my friend's birthday party. A local hairdresser styled it using an old-fashioned flat iron. The iron made a *hiss* sound every time it touched my hair, and I felt chills run down my spine whenever the iron came close to my ear, it was SO HOT. I think my scalp got burnt a few times. When I arrived at the party, I was anxious to see how my classmates and friends would react to my new hairstyle. Everyone was fascinated to see a new version of me. A white boy called me pretty for the first time. I felt so beautiful.

Unfortunately, that straight hair didn't last long, and in a desperate effort to avoid hairstyles that brought me mockery, I begged my mom to purchase a hair

straightener from a retail store. I demanded that she blow-dry and straighten my hair, and I swore that I would never wear her plaits again. I soon learned that poor technique, the absence of products tailored to Black hair, and lack of care led me down an unexpected path. My hair became heat damaged and broke considerably. I was used to having such thick, sometimes unmanageable hair, that it was weird for me to see my scalp with almost half of that abundance. It didn't worry me too much at the time as I knew it would grow back eventually.

When I started high school, I was determined to associate with people who understood me and my Blackness. The high school I attended merged eight elementary schools together and had a total upwards of 2000 kids at the time. I essentially dropped all my acquaintances from elementary school and spent my time with a group of Black girls and guys, most of whom had Caribbean parents. For the first time, I felt accepted for who I was, and I loved it. The people who teased me in elementary school and called me "whitewashed" or "oreo" had nothing to say now. My hair grew back (and I kept on straightening it after learning how to treat it better), and I hung out with Black girls who seemed to intimidate my former friends. There were still occasions when a white person or non-black person of colour would have a comment or two about my hair. In tenth grade I wore cornrows again, someone said my head looked like a pumpkin. In eleventh grade I wore long braided extensions, I was told I looked like JarJar Binks, from Star Wars. In twelfth grade, I wore my natural hair in a big puff on top of my head. People liked to stick pencils in there and see what they could hide. As frustrating as these comments and actions were, I continued to wear whatever hairstyle I felt suited me. I had the feeling that the teasing would never end as long as I associated with non-Black people, and I lived in a predominately white town so there was no escaping that.

7.3 Shocked

When I went to university, I thought I could recreate my identity. I'd be in a new town with new people. Only a few people from elementary or high school got accepted into the same university as I did, but the school was big enough for me to make new friends and not depend on my old connections. I'd grown up in a town where most of the residents were white, so I was used to living as a racially marginalized individual, but there were still enough Black and brown faces for me to feel somewhat comfortable at times. To say that I experienced culture shock at my university would be an understatement! Imagine this: In a school of almost 22,000 students at the time, I was the only Black girl on my residence floor, the only Black girl on my sports team, and one of three Black girls in my general science lectures (which seated about 500 students). I had hoped to feel included and welcomed into a new community of Black folk, but instead, I felt isolated and alone. It wasn't until my third year of undergrad that I discovered and participated in two student-run organizations by and for Black students. I felt more at ease than I had ever felt while at school. And I slowly dissociated from the friends I had made during my first and

second years... Now that I am living in Toronto, I am surrounded by people of all different appearances and from all different places. I still have trouble with my hair though, and it is quite tedious to take care of. I have tried many styles. Sometimes, I find myself just giving up and not styling it at all. I now wish my mother knew how to cornrow, maybe, she would have taught me...

7.4 To Be Black

What does it mean to be Black? Some of the assumptions I've heard are that Black people are exceptional athletes, great basketball players, and naturally good dancers. I've encountered positive stereotypes and derogatory stereotypes. There are many things that a Black person, and even a Black woman, *should* know how to do that I don't know how to do. Back to the topic of hair for a moment, I can't cornrow! In one of my former relationships, the Black male that I was seeing asked me to cornrow his hair for him. Vulnerably, I told him that I didn't know how to but that I would try my best. To my surprise, he said "how do you *not* know how to cornrow, you're Black. In fact, you're blacker than Black". I didn't expect to hear that from him - he is the darkest child out of five children, and he made it clear that he didn't quite like it. He probably had some unresolved issues with colourism, but then again, he was a few shades lighter than I was... I always wondered how he really felt about the colour of my skin.

Hearing stereotypical and anti-Black comments from Black males hurt me deeper than when I heard them from non-Black people. It felt like they didn't accept me unless I looked or acted a certain way, a way that wasn't often natural for me. For example, various Black men have told me that my "hair looks better when it is straightened" or that I "don't really speak/act like a Black person". These experiences impacted the way I viewed myself, I felt unwanted and less attractive. I never expressed to them how their comments made me feel; I kept those emotions bottled up inside, but I would distance myself and put up a wall around my heart so that I wouldn't be swayed by their conditional love. I truly didn't feel they could ever love or appreciate me for who I was.

Recently, I've encountered Black men who were interested in me for what seemed like all the wrong reasons. As in, they didn't see me as the 'stereotypical' loud and boisterous, or angry, Black girl, instead, they saw me as cute, sweet, and kind. They liked that I was rather soft-spoken and reserved in most situations, and (bonus!) they loved that I wore my natural hair. Then they would proceed to mock and belittle other more 'stereotypical' Black women. When I encounter these men, I feel conflicted and angry. I see them as being in denial of their own anti-Black views and consumed with a subconscious self-hatred. I pull myself away from these situations without mentioning how I truly feel, or what turned me off. I have a habit of disappearing, silently...

I must add, many people I meet are shocked to hear I am a graduate student. "A Black woman in grad school?"- that's the look on their faces! Another layer of

befuddlement gets added when they learn I studied Neuroscience at Queen's University. They pry and they pry until they get a response, but it never fits their predetermined biases. Unsatisfied, they hastily change the topic or say something like "Oh, Queen's students are really smart." In a condescending tone!

I often juggle many things at a time; multiple jobs, a few extracurriculars, hobbies, and passion projects. The more people learn about the number of things I'm up to, and the opportunities I've created for myself or have been provided, the more they ask me "how do I do it", as if it is uncommon for people to do more than one thing at a time. Or is it just uncommon for Black people to have so many positive things going for them, despite the world being stacked against them, I wonder?

The responses I receive make me question how deeply ingrained these biases and stereotypes are. Are Black people still not thought of as intelligent, ambitious, or elegant? Am I an anomaly or am I being made to feel so in an act of psychological manipulation? Oh, perhaps they are gaslighting me! I have started keeping my successes to myself now, especially when I meet new people. I am tired of being a surprise.

7.5 Art Is a Language

Did I mention I am an artist as well? That is an additional layer of complexity. The act of expressing oneself through art...

As an artist and storyteller, I feel my identity seeps through my work. I want to express myself and my feelings through my creations, and explore what arises from the intersection between art, culture, and identity. I believe that art is a form of communication, a practice of mental and emotional release, a window to understanding. Maybe my identity crisis will come to an end, but in the meantime, I will use art to document my journey. The first destination is to understand my heritage, and what it means to be 'of Jamaican descent'.

Of Jamaican Descent. A short poem.

I am the child of two immigrant parents and have always felt somewhat displaced. I am not as Jamaican as my parents, and I belong to a marginalized culture in Canada. It's an unsettling feeling to not feel at home in the country where you were born and raised. My parents don't expect me to be as Caribbean as they are. They see me as 'Canadian' and I see them as 'Jamaican'. What does it mean to be Canadian anyway? There is a disconnection.

The disconnection that I feel between myself and my parents because I cannot speak the language as well as they can. I cannot cook the traditional dishes. I am not aware of the references they make. I do not share their memories of the place they call home. I am the other.

The disconnection that I feel between my non-Jamaican and non-Black friends, colleagues, and peers, because I do not share the same culture that they do. I do not understand the references they make unless I happen to be familiar with the current trends of 'popular culture'. I do not look the same. I am the other.

But whose culture is it anyway? My existence is situated in an uncomfortable hybrid of Jamaican-Canadian, Canadian, Black (but with Jamaican heritage, not African-

American, and far from African...), and somehow, I am still not Jamaican enough, and I have yet to understand Canadian culture.

Remember when I said I was happy to connect with Black people during my undergrad after feeling alone when surrounded by non-Black people? I slowly learned the cultural distinctions between Caribbean Black and African Black. It's complex to me: Caribbeans were once Africans, and although I am Black, I am not African, but am I *really* Caribbean?

So how do I identify? Well, I'm not African-American because I am not from the U.S.A. Black culture in America is very different from Black culture in Canada, and although I am aware of my lineage from Africa, I want it to be clear that the Jamaican is in there - somewhere. What about just straight-up Caribbean? But then...I was born in Canada, and raised as Jamaican at home but Canadian otherwise - whatever that means. According to Jamaican locals, and even to my parents, that makes me not as Jamaican as someone who was actually born and raised in Jamaica, they feel they are more Jamaican than me. There are times when I say "I'm Jamaican!" with pride and other times when I feel the need to explain that "no, I wasn't born there, but my parents were". Sometimes I am Jamaican, other times Jamaican-Canadian, or just Canadian, or "of Jamaican descent". I change the labels I wear based on the context of the situation, and honestly, based on how I am feeling on that day. Lately though, I am just a person. I'm exhausted with the categorization of every aspect of my identity.

7.6 Migration

I've moved around a lot and have called many places 'home', but I usually grow uncomfortable after some passage of time. I've never lived with a Jamaican roommate. When I left home to go to university, I was just a few weeks shy of 18. I was so excited to finally be independent, yet, I missed the feeling of a Jamaican home. There were times when I would go to a grocery store and visit the international aisle to find Grace coconut water, peanut punch, bulla cake, and hard dough bread, but these were joys that I could only share with myself. I brought these great finds back to my room and enjoyed them silently.

I have always been in a state of wondering and wandering. For instance, I wonder what my parents' lives were like "back home," and I wander between friend groups, trying to find someone to whom I can relate, someone who understands the difficulties of being a culturally watered-down version of your parents, and a marginalized individual in a diverse community.

There's a high population of Jamaican immigrants who settled in Toronto, and a substantial amount of Jamaican culture to temporarily transport me to a place that reminds me of my parents and my extended family. My heart smiles when I encounter a passerby on the street who is speaking Jamaican Patois on the phone or to a

friend nearby. I've indulged in cuisine from a variety of Jamaican restaurants, since I don't live with my family anymore and I can't cook Jamaican food as well as I wish I could. Jamaican music, dances, and phrases have crept into Toronto's popular culture. There is enough for me to reminisce about moments that I shared with my family while growing up, but not too much to keep me satisfied or dispel my desire to re-visit Jamaica.

As the child of two immigrant parents, I've dealt with the impacts of immigration from a second-hand experience, and I recognize that my immigration experiences are completely different from that of my parents. I've longed to know what my family history is beyond the little island of Jamaica. We have been immigrants twice, however, the first time was not by choice. There is a 400 plus year gap between my family roots in Africa and their freedom in the Caribbean. It's an unsettling feeling to have a fragmented history, for I carry a last name that was not bestowed through marriage, but rather, through slavery. When you strip away someone's language, their cultural customs, their way of living, and their name, you strip away their identity, and I believe, I have been lost for a very long time.

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Recently, I received my MFA in Documentary Media from Toronto Metropolitan University. I also hold a diploma in Broadcast Television & Videography from Humber College (2020), and a BScH in Life Sciences, with a specialization in Neuroscience from Queen's University (2018).

Most of my work is reflective of my personal experiences. My interests are artistic identity, cultural identity, sentimental stories, and community building through shared experiences. I express these interests through the mediums of film, photography, graphic design, creative direction, and writing.

I find writing to be a process of mental and emotional release as I work through my convoluted thoughts. Writing helps me make sense of my feelings and ideas, and allows me to draw connections to social issues.

Journey Through the Self is a reflective essay in which I share my experience of navigating identity from childhood, through adolescence, and into adulthood as I struggle to feel accepted and understood in my friend groups and by the local communities around me. I also express when my Blackness appeared to be an obstacle, and contrast these experiences by highlighting the moments of redemption when my Blackness was celebrated. The piece ends with a wider perspective of what it's like to be a Canadian-born Black person of Caribbean heritage, distant from my long-lost African roots.

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