

If I had to sum up high school, I would do so with one simple word. Gray.

As a wide-eyed, 4'11" freshman, I entered Staley with ambitions of playing varsity soccer and having a haircut like Justin Bieber. The prior was rather understandable—with a school culture dominated by athletics and their many accolades, it was inevitable. But being an incognito single-issue Belieber? That's a different story.

Despite a bieberlicious hairstyle being anatomically impossible due to the thick, curly hair from my African-American heritage, that didn't stop me from trying, nonetheless. In my mind, I just needed a little more hair-gel. Though, multiple trips to Walmart and my first real encounter with race revealed something else; I truly needed appreciation.

Growing up in a sea of whiteness, my brown skin and ambiguous features seemingly confined me to grayness—an in-between. Though, for the majority of my schooling, I was oblivious. Race was only a subject of discourse for brief units on Civil Rights, around MLK Day to insist that we don't see color. So, freshman-year, when a fight broke out in the hallway, causing my long-time friend to proclaim, "black kids shouldn't be in a white school," I didn't know how to respond. As tears blurred my vision, I was told, "It's a joke. You're basically white anyway." And contemplating those words, I thought maybe there was truth in his assessment.

However, as I have sought opportunities that have challenged my understanding of the world throughout high school, I see how fallacious my capitulation to Staley's culture was. Today, I understand that I was invisible to my peers. This became clear when my Great Grandma cried in front of me for the first time while recounting hiding from the KKK as a child. Seeing that tear flow down her soft, brown skin *hurt*. It hurt to realize that for years, I didn't see the sacrifice she endured so I could even attend Staley. Until then, my education felt in vain.

I had learned the basics of deriving a function using the definition of a limit in Calculus II. Yet, I couldn't derive value from my heritage as a student of color amidst whiteness. I learned the intricate functions of our government, impactful court cases such as *Marbury v. Madison*. But I didn't understand how those like me played into that. And yes, I learned not to vape in the bathroom during *mandatory* class meetings. Although I never felt the same urgency amongst the sparsity of *optional* Black History Month ones.

Ultimately, I would be plain wrong to assert there are no opportunities for cultural enrichment at Staley. In Studio Art, Mrs. Cox pushes me to explore the work of Kehinde Wiley, a black artist who depicts people of color in positions of power. I have sat for hours with Dr. Dutton discussing the racially divisive history of Troost Avenue and how it affects the political climate today. Mr. Tapp has given me introspective books, the likes of Ralph Ellison and Richard Wright, to read outside of class. It's the fact that the same can't be said for the overwhelming majority that stains Staley's culture. These meaningful conversations are stifled by Staley pushing AP classes over art, lifting up athletics over academics, prioritizing the mastery of an exam over intellectual growth.

At the end of the day, I contemplated writing this essay altogether, worrying that I could've done more myself. Nevertheless, after staring at my computer under a cyclical spell of

typing my thoughts only to delete them, I've come to terms that maybe such responsibility shouldn't rest solely upon my shoulders—shoulders socialized to dismiss issues of race. Rather the responsibility to provide students the vitality to thrive as culturally aware citizens of the world rests on the institution created to prepare them.

Today, as my final descent through the doors of Staley approaches, I will leave knowing this:

I am white, and I am black. Yet, I am also so much more. And, indeed, my identity is *only* as gray as I perceive. My hope is that other students, too, can appreciate their beautiful differences with the support of a school system that actively pushes to promote cultural enrichment.