

A Biological Take on Skin:
Differences and Similarities
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Black people can't burn.

I was in fourth grade prepping for a school field trip – which was a big deal, when I first felt as though I didn't fit inside my own skin. Field trips were getting harder and harder to come by as we got older and the days leading up to them were some of the tensest, yet exhilarating days for our classroom.

On the day of the field trip, the forecast would have met the stereotypical standards expected of Florida: hot, sunny, mildly humid. For an elementary school composed of majority pale students, this warranted copious amounts of sunscreen.

I was one of the only black students in my class, which would have felt isolating if I bothered to ever think about it. At nine years old, race relations were one of the last things on my mind.

At the time, I was more concerned with getting through the formalities and boarding the bus with the rest of my friends. Our destination was a local farm,

which was good for me, because animals were one of the only things that truly held my attention.

My best friend, Anna, with her fiery red hair and sparse freckles was set on becoming a marine biologist which my interests revolved more around land based animals – big cats specifically. Cheetahs and leopards with their odd traits and qualities separated them from the fan favorites – tigers and lions – while simultaneously making them the sole owners of my heart.

Anna had the advantage when it came to one game that dominated the interest of the entire fourth grade class: sharks and guppies.

The moral of the game was relatively simple and almost self-explanatory based on the name alone. The guppies lined up against the school building and the sharks would wait in the field to tag them. Guppies that made it through the throng of sharks without getting caught would fight another round and those who didn't become sharks.

The game became harder and harder as more guppies converted to sharks, but that was what made it thrilling – so thrilling that most of us rejected our own self-care.

Anna was respectably good at this game, being one of the fastest girls in the fourth grade and well-known for her early career in track and field.

Unfortunately, a few weeks prior to our field trip, Anna combined too much running with too little water and collapsed in the middle of the game.

Most of all, I remember the color of her face, so red that it blended in with the shine of her hair and I found it mind-blowing that people could change colors so effectively. Being brown, you notice, is not something that changes based on any internal alterations.

That incident, I'm sure, is what led to the protectiveness of her mother from the sun and its rays on the sunny field trip day. Being partnered with her, I was there when her mother whipped out bottles of sunscreen that was passed around and massaged into the pale skin of my peers.

Watching them, I didn't think it unusual to ask for some as well. My mom made my brother and I wait plenty of times on the beach shore until she had covered us in sunscreen of her own. I was expecting this time to be no different.

I'm sure it wouldn't have been different had it not been for pale kid saying, "You don't need sunscreen." His tone wasn't imploring or even the slightest bit curious. His statement was made to be a fact, nothing more, nothing less.

I didn't even have time to question his statement before he said, "Black people don't burn."

I'm sure, seven years later, this event would not have remained persistent in my memory had it not been for the unnerving amount of detachment in his voice. The way he spoke of black people, the way he spoke of me, was the same way little kids spoke about ants, acknowledging, but not fully registering. Something as insignificant and plentiful as ants didn't entirely warrant full consideration the same way people did.

Now I was the recipient of that detachment.

This, of course, is easier to register seven years later at the age of sixteen. Nine year old me stood in a state of minor shock, unsure of how to process the situation or even respond to it.

There I was, one of the only brown people in the entire fourth grade, being told that my skin couldn't burn because...why?

Yes, brown skin is brown due to melanin, a natural protector of the sun, but did that make me invincible. Not invincible – that's too kind of an adjective. It was more like I was incapable of pain, it was dehumanizing.

What nine-year-old should feel like that? What person should feel like their skin, the one thing that's inescapable, irreplaceable is somehow wrong, or less deserving of sympathy.

Something as simple as being omitted sunscreen because my skin color put me in such a position that I couldn't even say anything. I just accepted it, and didn't put on any sunscreen.

There's something to be said about the lack of education towards the origin of our skin and how it differs. Realizing that my skin was brown and why it was that way and more importantly, realizing that it was just as susceptible to the same harms and dangers as my paler peers would have prevented a nine-year-old me from feeling like she didn't fit in her own flesh and blood.

Everyone can burn. Everyone can heal. Everyone can learn and everyone deserves the same standard of care and consideration.