

## Jordan Freer, El Dorado High School

The first time I went rafting was during the highwater of 2002, when my pregnant mother went on a midnight paddle through the Gorge on the South Fork of the American River and flipped her boat in Lower Haystack Canyon. Ever since, my love for the river has never wavered. I was born on her banks, lived in a tent beside her for the first six months of my life and barely a stroll away ever since. I learned to swim in her deliciously frigid waters, how to kayak and raft, to read water like a poem. Almost all of my childhood memories are deeply entwined with the river, from days spent on tiptoes reaching for oars heavier than me to evenings staining my tongue with abundant riverbank blackberries and nights zipped into a sleeping bag, sung to sleep by the melodies of whitewater.

I began working as a river guide for ARTA River Trips when I was fifteen - the youngest guide at ARTA and on the South Fork. I've rowed the technical, high-class water of the Tuolumne, the wildland of the Rogue, the stunning Yampa canyon and more, but the American will always be my home. The most comforting embrace I know is that of the Lotus foothills wrapped tight around me, sweet with poppies and purple lupin - *home*.

Some people say that "the outdoors is for everyone." At its most basic, the phrase holds true. At her core, Mother Nature is not discriminatory - but her indiscriminate nature cannot mitigate the obstacles that lie in the course of finding her. When taken in the context of today's sociopolitical constructions, this phrase's logic fails. There is very little concrete evidence regarding the racial demographics of river guides, outfitters, sponsored kayakers, etc. available to cite in regards to the effects of systemic and systematic racism on the whitewater industry. What is clear, however, is that my path to the river was smoothed for me by my skin color. I saw myself consistently represented in the guides who flowed through my home. I never wondered if I would be the only one who looked like me out on the water. I wonder sometimes if my passengers will respect me, trust me, listen to me because of my gender, my age, yes - but never because of the color of my skin.

Racial inequality permeates every facet of life in American society, and the rafting industry is no exception. It is my responsibility as a person with privilege to utilize my advantages to foster opportunities for those who do not have access to them. After unloading the day's gear from the van each day, I spent this summer's sticky evenings holding homemade signs on bridges and overpasses, marching to the State Capitol building, learning and unlearning my biases, and working towards the goal of bringing people from many more backgrounds together in the beauty of the American River. I want the outdoors to be for everyone - so I intend to make it happen.