

What I Learned When the Police Tore Up My Confession: On Being Black with White Privilege

As a teenager, I committed a crime in my small town of Weston, Connecticut and was caught. My Black American mother, South Asian Indian father, sister and I had moved to Weston in 1986 because the public schools were highly ranked. There is almost no crime in this quiet, affluent, heavily forested town. My father was surprised when a policeman came to our door. He remembers saying, “It must have been kids from Bridgeport.” To which I replied, “What makes you think that?”

While issues of race were ever present, talking about race was taboo. I was left to navigate being a mixed-race girl in predominantly White Weston on my own. My parents never gave me the talk typically had between Black parents and their children about how to act if questioned by police. Yet, while my mother waited for me in the police station, she was not afraid of never seeing me again. She was not afraid of my being physically harmed. She was not afraid that the incident would ruin my life. She could be confident that I would be afforded leniency in my adolescent misadventure. The Weston police had me make a written confession of my misdeeds. Then they tore it up. They told me they never wanted to see me there again. To me, the police were an extension of the world of adults that took care of me and looked out for my best interests even as they tried to teach me life lessons. Throughout my life, my experience with the Weston police has stayed with me, and it is key to my coming to understand that although I am Black, I have White privilege.

I don't recall exactly when it took place, but I can generally date my crime by the fact that I had already left the Weston public school system. Given the racially and economically homogeneous student body of Weston, private school gave me a diverse environment. My experience with the Weston police likely took place my freshman year, 1991, the same year police were caught on tape beating Rodney King. I remember Abner Luima (1997) and Amadou Diallo (1999), and I remember the Central Park Five (1989), what was then known as “the central park jogger case.” Throughout the entire decade of the 90's and beyond, I do not recall even one time being self-reflective about the differences between any of their encounters with police and my own. I was shocked, saddened and scared by each of these events, but the fear

was not fear for my body. It was a kind of existential fear, like the fear I felt in school when we were shown Holocaust documentary footage, fear of knowing what we as people can do to one another, fear of the knowledge that the potential for violence lay within us and within myself.

At the time of this writing, I am forty-four, and for the past several years, I have reflected again and again on my adolescent encounter with the Weston police. It is notable that it took me that long because that too serves as evidence of just how great the gulf is between disenfranchised people and places and elite White people and places, such as Weston, Connecticut. The gulf is so great, the comparison is rarely drawn.

At the time, I truly had no idea just how extraordinary my experience with the police was. It is worth describing in greater detail. I'll start with the crime. There was a family, Indian, like mine through my father's side. They lived a couple houses down from me and had three kids. The oldest girl was close to my sister's age. The middle boy was my age, and the youngest was a little girl no older than six. As the school bus dropped us off at the bottom of the road that we lived at the top of, the five of us regularly walked home together. Typically, they came to our house. I remember my parents complaining that we five kids ate up everything, and that by the time they returned from work, the fridge was empty. This was but one sign that our friends' family was struggling. When their house went into foreclosure, and they were forced to move, I was upset and angry. After they were gone, I sat in their yard. One day, I took two White friends who lived on an adjacent street to stare angrily with me at the former home of my friends. These two White friends had become my new bus-to-home walking companions. When one of these friends put his shoe to a small basement window of the vacant house, I remember being surprised by how readily the window gave way. After that, we simply left the door unlocked. The house became our new hangout. Emboldened by what we had done, we next found a way into the house across the street, a recent construction, not yet inhabited. We wandered around the house, reclined on the carpeting, did backbends in front of the mirrored doors of the master bedroom, and of course, ate the crackers we found in a cabinet, stored there for the realtor's open house. A neighbor witnessed.

When my dad called me downstairs because there was a policeman at the door informing us of break-ins and asking if we had any information. I lied. The officer left. Next, an officer called my house and asked to speak to me. The officer spoke to me firmly but without anger. He advised me to tell my parents what I had done. This seems utterly remarkable to me now. I

committed the crime, and when confronted, I lied, yet the police went out of their way to protect me from shame! I was never charged. I paid no fine. My name was never reported. I remember feeling afraid of what I had done and afraid of some nebulous state of being in trouble, but I wasn't scared of the police. It wasn't that kind of fear.

Over the years, decades really, I used my own experience to mentally counter descriptions of police harassment made by Black people across America and abroad. When, for example, I heard that leniency in adolescent misadventure is granted only to rich White boys, I had clear evidence to the contrary, right? I failed to subject my reactions to deep introspection. I failed to see that even though I am Black, my experience with the police was racialized not by Blackness but by Whiteness.

Though I am Black, I assert that I have White privilege. White privilege comes with being a resident of a town like Weston, and the White privilege of my town is everywhere represented in how my bad behavior was met with patience, leniency and gentleness. The non-punitive approach not only protected me from real-world consequences, great pains were also taken to protect me emotionally. As a citizen of my sheltered town, White privilege was extended to me.

What exactly were the life lessons I was taught by this experience? Certainly, it did instill in me an aversion to misbehavior, and that lying was neither a good nor an effective route. But there were other lessons too. Consciously or not, I learned that rules, even official ones, are flexible and can be made to accommodate me. I learned that I can count on my family and on a system of social forces external to my family to protect me.

My sense of entitlement, an extension of my White privilege, stopped me from scrutinizing my experience against the backdrop of the stories we have all heard from Black America. My privilege and the sense of entitlement that privilege bred in me have allowed me for years to tell my story not as a story of American racial injustice, but as a story of adventure, myself as hero. How many times have I told this story without even mentioning race? Retold with its racial implications, this is the truthful telling. I tell it to you now to provide a complex perspective on the racial inequalities that are being contested in public demonstrations and in police departments and in the halls of congress. I recount it also for the purpose of seeing it clearly for myself.

For a lot of Black people in America and around the world, a feeling of kinship with George Floyd is automatic. The similarities in their life experiences, the way their color, gender and class intersect, make their relationship to George Floyd visceral and immediate. For those of us whose life experiences differ, including for Black Americans like myself, I postulate, our difference to George Floyd is just as visceral and just as immediate. I believe that what happened to Mr. Floyd could happen to me, but I am secure in the knowledge that the likelihood is remote. For people who actually are like me, not people who simply “look like me,” identification with Floyd is not automatic. Rather, it’s a choice and it’s a moral imperative. I choose, and I must choose to say I identify with George. We *are* kin. Just as race, class and gender conspire to disadvantage Floyd, they, at times, conspire to advantage me even as a Black person. The fact that I have the freedom to choose, to take or to leave my moral imperative is but one example of this advantage. In addition to my being female, the differences between Floyd’s racialized characteristics and mine are readily discernible. The way I talk, walk and dress are not individual choices; rather, they are predictable outcomes of my social circumstance. The ways I embody race are outcomes of my proximity to Whiteness and my distance from Blackness. Throughout my life, I have been sheltered from the difficulties of Floyd’s life, just as I am sheltered from the shocking atrocity of his death.

To not see myself in Floyd would be to accept the terms that others, Black and White, use against me, that I am not Black enough, that my rare and rarified experience disqualifies me. That is wrong. In fact, mine too is a Black experience, and I too experience overt and covert racism both in my town and elsewhere. I refuse the tendency of White people to use me or other Black people with privilege as rhetorical devices for dismissing or discounting the prevalence of racism. How many of my non-Black friends, colleagues and clients have used their affiliation with me to mentally assuage their distance from Black America? How many have used our friendship to counter difficult truths about America and about themselves?

A further complexity is that my Blackness does not render me exempt from benefiting from White privilege, systemic racism and White supremacy. Often, Black people like me openly or in veiled ways participate in systems that advantage the few and disadvantage the many. I participated in the upholding of White supremacy when I used my own encounter with the police to discount what I heard from Black America. Black people like me cannot be complicit. We cannot allow ourselves to be used as proof that racism is a minor problem. Nor should we accept it when we are positioned to doubly benefit from the system. Let’s not, for example,

allow schools and businesses to meet their diversity goals with candidates like us, and like our children, candidates for whom no cultural discomfort on the part of the institution is necessary.

My graduate school studies were funded by a diversity fellowship. Not only did I accept the fellowship, I never challenged the institution. I failed to ask their intentions with the award. Nor did I ask why there was only one, one diversity fellowship and one Black student, me. Now, I ask, who might my refusal have aided? Whom did I replace? If I'd had the courage to challenge the institution, if I'd had the will to work beyond personal gain, might a more inclusive and representative educational environment have emerged? Under what assumptions was I granted the award? Was it under the belief that ours is a meritocracy, and that within that system, I had earned it? Are those the false terms under which I accepted it? Because I didn't understand my privilege, I didn't see the hands on the scale, the hands of my parents, my teachers, my town, but, we are the inequality. The wind at our back is not providence. It's power.

How do we redirect it?