

DECEMBER 08, 2020

Why I Check the “Black” Box

I learned racial ambiguity was not something I could afford.



Photo illustration by Natalie Matthews-Ramo

by Lori Teresa Yearwood

I have light-brown skin the color of coffee mixed with a ton of cream and dark, thick, curly hair. For more than 51 years, I checked the “other” box on any forms asking about my racial identity, writing on the lines allotted for explanation: “Father is Panamanian. Mother is white.”

But the white police officer never asked me about my race.

“I’m taking you to jail because I don’t like you,” he told me as he escorted me to his squad car. I would end up living in the county jail, in a 8-foot-by-10-foot cell, for the next six months.

It was Sept. 2, 2016, and the officer, a plump, balding man, had been standing on the outskirts of Salt Lake City, waiting to arrest me, a homeless woman at the time, for bathing in a public river.

“African American/Black,” my arrest record states.

Four years later, as I was combing through my records for my memoir, I found the officer’s assumption about my racial identification. How, in the most vulnerable time of my life, had I lost my ability to define myself?

Through a quick succession of tragedies, I had lost my financial and emotional ability to stay rooted in my middle-class life. Suddenly, I plunged into a two-year-long nightmare in which I—a college-educated woman who had held good-paying jobs and owned homes—became homeless, grew severely traumatized, lost connection with myself, and got thrown in jail and locked up in psych wards.

In that state of quiet submission, in those terrifying places, I learned how those with the authority to do so could snatch me off the streets and lock me into tiny, fluorescent-lit rooms and cells, away from the fresh air, sun, and sky. I learned that I had lost control over how other people would classify me or treat me. And I learned firsthand the quintessential story of how this country can so callously devalue, even extinguish, a Black life.

Black women in the United States are [almost twice as likely](#) as white women to be incarcerated. The overall rate of Black imprisonment for men and women at the end of 2018 was [more than five times](#) the rate among whites.

When it comes to mental health treatment, Black people are more likely to be considered mentally ill than white people. Clinicians tend “to overemphasize the relevance of psychotic symptoms and overlook

symptoms of major depression in African-Americans compared with other racial or ethnic groups,” a [2019 Rutgers study](#) found.

I didn't begin to put the pieces of the puzzle together until 2018, a full year after I was safely ensconced in a home, was working again, and could think about something other than staying alive on the streets. That's when I reentered the field of journalism by writing an [in-depth article](#) for the Washington Post about my plunge into and emergence from homelessness.

I revisited that first year, when I was repeatedly stalked, beaten, and sexually assaulted by a man who was working at the homeless outreach center where I went to get my hygiene kits. And I remembered the best I could the start of the second year, when I began lying in desperation and nakedness on the streets of Salt Lake City.

On the occasions when the police took me to psych wards, no one bothered to ask any possible reasons behind my behavior before they injected me with court-ordered antipsychotics. If I showed any hesitation—such as backing away from the nurse administering the drugs—at least two more nurses would suddenly appear as a deterrent to my hesitation. And so I acquiesced.

Sorting through the piles of paperwork to research my own story, I found that the diagnoses from various doctors ran the gamut from “possible civil disobedience” to “schizophrenic.” But there was one consistent finding that followed me, whether I was put in a jail cell or a sterile white room: “African American/Black.”

“You Have to Choose”

I wasn't raised to correlate the treatment that I received in the world with the color of my skin. Instead, I was brought up to believe that who I was had nothing to do with society's insistence, expectation, or definition.

My father had skin the color of deeply stained mahogany. My mother's skin was so white that without regular sunning, it appeared translucent.

My father had grown up in Panama, the son of a Baptist minister who encouraged his nine children to further their educations. So in his early 20s, my father left the row of humble but well-kept apartment homes where he was raised in Panama for Texas in the 1940s to attend Bishop College, a historically Black institution.

[Jim Crow laws](#) were in effect and my father was denied housing and jobs because of the color of his skin. Once, while he was sitting on a bench, a policeman physically kicked him off of it. Not because my father had done anything wrong. But simply because that officer had the power to act in a hateful way and get away with it.

Vernon Yearwood-Drayton went on, through tenacity and grit, to become a microbiologist at NASA Ames Research Center, where he eventually worked on space shuttle experiments. That was the image I tried to emulate in my own life, and the one he insisted others relate to—not that of the formerly oppressed or downtrodden. Only rarely did he speak about the trauma associated with race in this country, because to do would have made him delve into his own vulnerability. I also think that vulnerability is the reason he distanced himself from Black Americans who tried to befriend him.

It was only after my father's death, when I was researching my own memoir, that I learned my father's father had emigrated to Panama from the British-owned colony of Grenada. He was most likely the direct descendant of enslaved men and women kidnapped and shipped across the ocean from Nigeria or Ghana like livestock.

But his wife was white, as were her sons he'd adopted shortly after their marriage. So when I was born, at a Denver hospital in 1965, he insisted to the staff there that we were a white family. It was not until I began working on my book that I looked at my birth certificate and discovered I'd been officially defined as "white."

My parents didn't inform me about the racial identity they'd claimed for me. They didn't talk about race, and neither did I. Nor did I think about it much, in my early childhood, covered by my dad's cloak of protection and dreamlike naïveté. I simply had tan skin.

But it's not possible to stay naïve about race in this country. My innocence was shattered in the seventh grade.

White kids from my middle school, mainly from the tony towns of the Bay Area, made fun of my voluminous hair—or simply ignored me by refusing to invite me onto their teams or to their parties. At the same time, many of the Black kids, who were being bused in from the then-almost-exclusively Black and working class city of East Palo Alto, had taken to calling me “Oreo.”

On a late fall afternoon, a bus about to cross the concrete wall and freeway that divided the affluent town of Palo Alto from East Palo Alto dropped me off. Just as I was walking beneath the bus's windows, one of the Black students spat on me.

My parents called the principal, and the next morning, a Black counselor at the school brought me to her office.

“What race are you?” she asked.

I thought about how my mother told me she had Cherokee blood in her and how her ancestors were from what was then Czechoslovakia. Like my father, she never talked about exactly how my ancestors came to this country. Perhaps she didn't know. Nevertheless, for me, the result was the same. I had been growing up with no ethnic or cultural identity in which to ground myself.

I stood in the guidance counselor's office, unsure what to say.

“I'm not any race,” I finally told her. “I'm Black and white.”

“You're going to have to choose,” she said, shaking her head.

I didn't, though.

The Sidelines

As I got older, I continued to live a life on the sidelines of any racial identity. In some ways this worked for me. I majored in journalism in

college and went on to land a reporting position at the Miami Herald, where I wrote about people from the city's wide array of racial and ethnic backgrounds—African Americans, Haitians, Cubans, and other Latinos, to name a few.

No one in the communities I covered asked me what race I was. The people I interviewed did not see me as an outsider, and yet I was, as I did not identify with any single race or culture in particular. This gave me a distinct asset in my field—a mix of outside acceptance and inner distance. I flourished in my work.

Making Black friends in the newsroom was a different story. I always felt apart from my Black colleagues, feeling as if there was always a wall between me and them.

I wasn't sure why. Sometimes I thought it was simply the competition that is part of the atmosphere of every newsroom. Other times, I wondered if my tendency to carry my past with me—and feel hurt at the slightest hint of rejection—was the problem.

Only decades later, when an old colleague from the Herald, who identifies as Black, contacted me on Facebook and gave some feedback about the situation, did I understand my loneliness. "There was some question amongst the Black reporters about whether you were authentically Black," he told me.

I didn't say much, but the idea of that reality made me feel angry and defensive. How could I have been any more authentically me than I already was, I thought. The truth is that back then, I never actually saw myself as Black. Nor did I see myself as white. I found my first reporting job at the Syracuse Newspapers in New York through the National Association of Black Journalists. I did feel uncomfortable identifying as Black when I didn't feel exclusively Black inside, but I had felt much more supported by my Black college professors at San Francisco State than I did by most of my white professors.

Besides, going to an NABJ conference felt more appropriate than attending the National Association of Hispanic Journalists, as my father

didn't speak Spanish around me when I was a child. He and my mother didn't know how easily children can learn languages. Like a lot of parents back then, they thought it would only confuse me.

That was how, for 50-some odd years, I navigated my way along the edges of the mainstream, learning how to live, sometimes even thrive, as an outsider in a world obsessed with race.

Divide and Conquer

And then I was right in the middle of it, standing on a mound of grass by the river when I had bathed and then quickly dressed, with my hands locked behind my back while other people jogged and walked their dogs nearby. I could not know, of course, what that Salt Lake City policeman was really thinking when he arrested me. Is it possible that my race had nothing to do with my arrest?

But to believe that would be to cling to an incredible denial—a denial that the concept of race was created, and is still being upheld, by white people in this country to claim and maintain power for themselves. From the inception of this nation, white people have granted themselves privileges while denying those same privileges to Black people. When the barrier to Black people's right to vote was knocked down by the Reconstruction amendments, white people set it back up again for nearly another century, until [the Voting Rights Act](#) gave the federal government the power to enforce what had been in the Constitution for 97 years.

That enforcement, prohibiting states from using literacy tests and other methods of excluding Black people from voting, went into effect in 1965, the year I was born. In October of 2020, USA Today [reported](#) that a poll worker in Memphis, Tennessee, had turned voters away who were wearing masks and T-shirts that read "Black Lives Matter." And in Cumming, Georgia, a man [recorded a video of a poll worker](#) telling him he would have to take off his Black Lives Matter shirt to vote.

Who falls into the "Black" or "white" category has always been socially determined. When I talked to Ronald E. Hall, a professor of social work at Michigan State University, about my experience with the police officer, Hall told me about the sociological concept called [the master status](#)—the

aspect of a person's identity that other people take as definitive, above their other features.

He succinctly explained how it works: "I'm a professor. But a white policeman looks at me and he sees a drug dealer or a gang banger."

Hall is of mixed-race himself—his ancestry includes Cherokee, British, and African forebears—and he is the author of the book [Racism in the 21st Century](#) and a co-author of [The Color Complex: The Politics of Skin Color in a New Millennium](#).

"Regardless of what you do or what you say, your Blackness is the most specific aspect of your identity," he said. "Anything you do as a Black person, Black precedes it."

In 2000, the U.S. Census Bureau began allowing people to choose more than one racial category to describe themselves. In 2013, approximately 9 million Americans chose two or more racial categories when asked about their race. According to [a survey by the Pew Research Center in 2015](#), 55 percent of the multiracial adults surveyed said they have been subjected to racial slurs or jokes.

A Shared Experience

At the same time I was feeling the powerlessness and shame of having my identity dictated by others, another act of identification was happening around me. Emerging from my collapse, to my surprise and comfort, I found a nearly unconditional acceptance primarily among Black people.

"Let me tell you how I can relate," so many people told me.

And when I least expected it: "I was homeless, too."

And: "Sister, I was arrested, too—and I had no idea what I had done wrong."

Again and again we would nod our heads in instant and mutual understanding.

One Black man, who founded a nonprofit in 2019 to help the indigent and incarcerated in Salt Lake City, had been homeless, spent time in prison, and lost all his friends. A Black woman who has become my closest friend in Salt Lake also lost almost everything. She went on to become a clinical social worker. And my former colleague from the Miami Herald?

He saw a Facebook post I had written about my collapse and wrote: “I can relate. We should talk.”

We did, and he ended up referring me to the Economic Hardship Reporting Project, a news outlet that has since contracted with me to write many stories about the disenfranchised.

Don’t get me wrong. I also have wonderful, steadfast friends who are white. But even in their kindness, I can’t help but notice their continual shock at how the system betrayed me.

“Really?” they say. “I had no idea things were that bad.”

In that surprise and denial of how broken the systems in this country truly are, I find myself too tired to bridge the distance by way of explanation. When will we stop being shocked by the police brutality so horrifyingly brought to our attention by the deaths of individuals like George Floyd and Breonna Taylor? When will we acknowledge that this country has a big problem and needs to deal with it?

I will never forget the day that I was released from jail, when I stood in front of a white judge, shackled and handcuffed, waiting for her to decide my fate.

“You have spent enough time in jail,” she told me.

That charge against me was later dismissed, as my actions were proved to be a result of trauma—not a willful disobedience of the law. My mental health records have also been changed—the director of a psychological service agency that specializes in treating the homeless and formerly homeless, and who also helped me process the trauma I had

experienced, went into my hospital files and erased every previous diagnosis, entering the words: post-traumatic stress syndrome instead.

Still, the past can never be fully erased. And that's why, today, nearly four years after my emergence, I choose to check the "Black" box.

When I check the "Black" box, I add my individual voice to the chorus of millions of others who need to be counted. On a census survey. On a hospital intake form. On an insurance form. On a housing application. In whatever way they can.

Even when I fear that I will be judged as lesser than and given unequal treatment—I sometimes still work through post-traumatic stress symptoms when I visit white doctors—I check the "Black" box.

I haven't stopped embracing the different ethnicities that make me who I am. But I was so clearly discounted for the color of my skin. And now I want that part of me to be counted as many times as possible.



Lori Teresa Yearwood. Photo: Cass Studios of Salt Lake City

Lori Teresa Yearwood's work can be found at loriyearwood.com