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Privilege in a Police Car: The Story of my Unresolved Ride-Along

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the events of a Friday evening in the winter of 2012 wherein I went on a police “ride-along” and accompanied a police officer as he went through the normal duties of his shift in a medium-sized city in the Pacific Northwest. During our time together, the officer arrested a 16-year old boy, and had him admitted to the local juvenile detention center. The officer also arrested an adult male who, during the process of being arrested, injured the officer such that the officer required medical attention. Additionally, I witnessed another officer performing an analysis of a suspected illegal substance. Drawing from critical autoethnographic methods, this paper details the events of the evening from my first-person perspective and is threaded with analyses of various facets of my privilege that emerged. The nagging questions that grew from these recognitions of unearned privilege are posed both to myself (as author) and also to readers, with the invitation to ponder the issues with me.

Keywords

Autoethnography, Privilege, Police, Ride-Along

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Privilege in a Police Car: The Story of my Unresolved Ride-Along

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This paper focuses on the events of a Friday evening in the winter of 2012 wherein I went on a police “ride-along” and accompanied a police officer as he went through the normal duties of his shift in a medium-sized city in the Pacific Northwest. During our time together, the officer arrested a 16-year old boy, and had him admitted to the local juvenile detention center. The officer also arrested an adult male who, during the process of being arrested, injured the officer such that the officer required medical attention. Additionally, I witnessed another officer performing an analysis of a suspected illegal substance. Drawing from critical autoethnographic methods, this paper details the events of the evening from my first-person perspective and is threaded with analyses of various facets of my privilege that emerged. The nagging questions that grew from these recognitions of unearned privilege are posed both to myself (as author) and also to readers, with the invitation to ponder the issues with me. Keywords: Autoethnography, Privilege, Police, Ride-Along

Within my professional practice as a teacher educator, I strive to act with fealty to supporting the future teachers in my classes in adopting the most critical and proactive counter-hegemonic stances possible (Apple, 2004). To this end, students in my courses are asked to move through and then beyond engagement in “courageous conversations” (Singleton & Linton, 2005) and “cultural plunges” (Houser, 2008), and to make themselves vulnerable, naming unwarranted privileges, challenging injustice, and speaking in solidarity with (but never for) the oppressed. Duncan-Andrade (2010) describes this by stating, “We must be willing to stand boldly in solidarity with our communities, sharing the burden of underserved suffering. We cannot treat our students as “other people’s children” — their pain is our pain” (para. 1).

While including a concentrated focus on race, class, and gender, pre-service teachers entering my multicultural education course are asked to step outside this familiar “other-ness” canon (Gorski, 2008) and stretch it to include topics that may be less comfortable and more taboo. In doing so, they take on the role of researchers and examine their own conceptions of difference, and explore how these may shape their work as educators. Focusing on the metaphorical pressure-points that cause psychological discomfort, my students are asked to examine the origins of their beliefs about what they consider “normal” and to attempt to parse about where those ideas came from.

In working to shift the margins of comfort, the student-researchers in my course are asked to reflect upon their own constructions of borders and their reactions to trespass, and to consider the ways they, as future educators, may have already been primed to “defend” certain boundaries (Anzaldúa, 1987). These acts of perceived trespass and defense are then problematized, and examined not with the binary framework of normal/ different, but rather, contextualized in family, community and cultural belief systems (Marshall & Toohey, 2010). Students are urged to identify, consider and create shades of gray, looking for personal, fine-grained “tipping points” where something moves from good to bad, acceptable to unacceptable, friendly to foul—and then to consider why those points exist and how they came into being.

Further exploring this tension around identifying “normal,” students in the course are asked to examine the power relationships they participate in, and how these hierarchical

relationships were established and are maintained (Vaandering, 2010). Building from this thinking and theorizing, students are asked to “warp the lens” to attempt novel views of their roles as educators in ways that may “move the margins” of normal and different in their classroom communities (Ullucci & Battey, 2011).

Informed by critical theory, this work intends to be an effort which, “recognizes power--that seeks in its analyses to plumb the archaeology of taken-for-granted perspectives to understand how unjust and oppressive social conditions came to be reified as historical “givens” (Cannella & Lincoln, 2012, p. 105). By employing critical theory, the intent of this work is to help scratch away at these givens--particularly those most stubbornly rooted ideas and ideals related to power and privilege.

Building upon these ideas, this work also draws from feminist epistemology, in that the situated-ness of the knowledge of schooling signals a masculinity that is often unnamed and unchallenged. Invoking Anzaldúa’s (2002) concept of the *nepantlera*, which she describes as those who “facilitate passage between worlds” and who engage in thinking that seeks to “question old ideas and beliefs, acquire new perspectives, change worldviews, and shift from one world to another” (p. 1), this work frames my thinking as active and agentic, questioning and challenging.

Further, I have decided to frame this paper as an autoethnography, centering my own lived experience and making no claims for generalization. Ellis (2004) provides a description of autoethnography that may be useful to consider when reading this paper:

The author usually writes in the first person, making ...herself the object of the research. The narrative text focuses on generalization within a single case... The text is presented as a story... The story often discloses hidden details of private life and highlights emotional experience. A reflexive connection exists between the lives of participants and researchers that must be explored. And the relationship between writers and readers of the texts must be one of involvement and participation. (p. 30)

As such, this paper asks you, the reader, to ponder a range of issues with me as I seek deeper clarity. Perhaps this pondering will provide new clarity for you as well.

Within my own life, both professional and personal, I attempt to engage in the same kinds of activist and disruptive types of work I ask of my students- warping my own lenses and moving my own margins. But within this work, I realize how easy it is to become complacent, and allow for my own margins to become static and familiar. This is something I (along with many others) wrestle with, and need to be frequently reminded about.

Sometimes an attempt at crossing a border or redefining a margin can lead to other opportunities to do so in even more profound ways. One example took place in August, 2012, when I traveled with a group of about a dozen folks from the city to Turkey to participate in a cross-cultural dialogue trip. While in Turkey, we visited various community groups in different regions, engaging in a series of enriching and problematic conversations wherein we compared and contrasted elements of our families, cultures, beliefs, practices and communities. While participating in these conversations and journeys, I was fortunate in getting to know my traveling companions rather well, as we spent long hours together each day, both in active, structured dialogues and in informal “down time.” Opportunities for wandering conversations were ripe.

Before the trip, I passingly knew a few of the other folks, but most were new to me. An eclectic bunch, we represented various walks of life-- although all involved in some form of community-based work and/ or social justice. There were 3 married couples, and 5 single travelers, including me. One of the pairs was a law-enforcement couple-- Shelly (a pseudonym)

works for the County Sheriff's Office, and Mark (also a pseudonym) works for the city Police Department, and they met through their common interest in criminal justice. One evening, while basking under the moon at our hotel in Antalya (beside the Mediterranean), I asked them about their work. After they each offered some generalities, I probed further, and asked, "What do you wish people knew about your jobs?" Mark explained that he wished people would participate in the City Police ride-along opportunity-- which is available at no charge as part of their community outreach efforts. I told him I would strongly consider it.

Over the next few months, after returning home from Turkey, I pondered Mark's suggestion, washed with a range of conflicting feelings-- curiosity, revulsion, academic interest, fear... But as I considered my professional practice as a teacher educator with a commitment to social justice and challenging assumptions, I realized that much of my work involves asking future teachers to take risks, challenge their thinking and push themselves to look at issues from new and perhaps uncomfortable angles. Choosing to participate in a ride-along would be an opportunity for me to engage in stretching my own thinking and comfort, and would surely provide me with fresh and rich insights. This was a solid example of boundary-crossing, and by engaging this, I could, with greater confidence, ask my students to cross boundaries as well. I was, in the truest sense, attempting to move into a new "figured world," which, as described by Urrieta (2007), is "a social reality that lives within dispositions mediated by relations of power" (p. 109). By taking on this new role, new insights were sure to follow.

So I decided to do it. And what happened, though described in great detail on the following pages, can be summarized quite simply by stating that this exercise highlighted areas of my privilege that I not only had previously failed to recognize, but that I realized I might enjoy preserving. This identification of privileges--and my shocking realization that I liked much of it--was disorienting and troubling, serving to clash with my own vision of self. I've so often asked my students to "Comfort the disturbed and disturb the comfortable," and in this experience, I was clearly being disturbed. It was a deeply beneficial and provocative experience.

Once the fall term ended, I contacted Mark and he helped me set up my ride-along appointment. I should note that I contacted Mark at his personal email address (even though his City Police email address is publicly available), which, upon reflection, I found myself wondering about. Why not use his work email? I think that perhaps this was a reflection of my overall discomfort and uncertainty about the whole thing, and somehow using his personal address (an email account shared with his wife) seemed to strengthen my "insider" status in some way, lending a mild sense of comfort. I think this was a way of demonstrating or leveraging my privilege, showing/ telling myself (and anyone else) that I am not an ordinary citizen seeking this experience-- I'm a friend of this person with power. Recognizing this in myself was startling, and also disappointing. And by lingering on this-- this shame at my own enrichment of my privilege, I see how, like an ouroboros (the snake eating its own tail), I keep the conversation centered on myself-- again, a manifestation of my privilege. Ouch.

And let me provide a bit more context, to more fully articulate some of my other (already well-recognized) privilege. I am a middle class, educated white woman. I speak English fluently with a Midwestern accent, and I am physically able. In other words, I am the kind of person often protected by police officers. The kind of person not singled out for extra scrutiny. The kind of person who was raised to see cops as "the good guys." Privilege, privilege, privilege.

As the scheduled date of the ride-along drew nearer, I found that I was a bit keyed up and nervous. I realized, gradually, that I genuinely had very little idea what to expect. Although I am aware of the show *Cops*, I had (and have) never watched an episode, nor any other police or law enforcement-focused television programs or movies. My limited experience with the

work of law enforcement officers has been primarily through my own speeding tickets (two), the works of countless authors of color, and whatever else the media incidentally provides me, most of which is dismaying. I recalled visions of the U.C. Davis officer pepper-spraying peaceful protesters (Jardin, 2011) and countless other accounts of police brutality, and I realized that up to this point, I had never sought information about or contact with law enforcement. Maybe growing up on military bases, with the constant presence of uniformed, armed people, dulled or blunted my interest or curiosity in some way. Or maybe I believed the accounts I'd heard and read of police aggression and mistreatment, which left me somewhere between uneasy and outraged. But thanks to Mark's suggestion, I found myself ready to focus my attention and gaze on the work of officers in our city, to move past whatever preconceived notions I might hold. I went in with the same expectations I ask of my students: to learn.

It Begins

My ride was scheduled for a Friday evening-- December 21, 2012. A bit before the appointed time, I parked my car in a downtown parking garage, and sat nervously chewing gum and watching the drizzle, aware that my heart was beating more noticeably than normal. Finally I went into the building and approached the woman at the front desk, and spoke with her through the thick glass. After having my license copied and waiting in the precinct lobby for a few short minutes, Officer Rick Ruby (a pseudonym) greeted me, smiling, with "Hi, I'm Rick. Are you Anita?" I said yes, and he invited me to follow him through a heavily secured door. I was trying to take in my surroundings, but also a bit overwhelmed at all the detailed pieces of Rick's outfit, which had a lot more going on than a typical standing-in-line-at-the-library Air Force uniform I had grown accustomed to while growing up. I noted sharp looking dark slacks, matching pressed dark shirt, and about 30 different gadgety things attached to his body and clothing in various ways. He was like a scuba diver with lots of fancy gear but excellent trim-- everything neatly tucked and stowed, but clearly just a velcro-rip from accessibility.

We walked through a little office-cubicle zone, and then through a room that look a lot like a small high school computer lab. "We're having roll call right now" he said quietly. I nodded and said, "Oh, okay" feeling mildly smug in my insider-knowledge of roll call from my years as a teacher. Again, my privilege was trying to assert itself.

We ended up walking into a room filled with about 20 or 25 other men and women dressed exactly like Officer Ruby, sitting in chairs at long tables, facing a few folks seated at the front. It reminded me a bit of a school where the students all wear uniforms, except these uniforms had protective and dangerous things in addition to the normal logos and badges. Rick led us to some empty chairs in the rear, and we both sat down. One of the three men at the front was speaking, making announcements. I had the impression the meeting may have started a minute or two before we arrived, as there was definitely no recognizable roll call going on. As we settled into our chairs, the man speaking explained that a colleague had recently had a baby, and he was going to pass around a congratulatory card for people to sign. Without missing a beat, he then shifted the tone and talked about a stolen bicycle, and provided a few details about it. At this, I began to think, "Oh, right, this is my chill city. Family-oriented, mild-mannered folks, bicycles... this is "news" here." But then, just as I began to relax and again enjoy that sense of privileged knowing, the man speaking noted a recent stabbing and then followed up with commentary about a particular KFC that had been robbed at gunpoint twice in recent days. My eyes scanned the faces in the room; they were placid, unmoved. Jarred by the shift in the quality of the announcements and perhaps wanting to conceal any traces of concern on my own face, I performed my version of "judicious note-taker," bowed my head towards my notebook, and jotted, "KFC something dang."

Upon reflection, I see I was intent on mimicking the smooth and unruffled facade affected by the officers, needing to somehow appear unbothered, unafraid, unintimidated. Part of me sees this as fingerprints of my self-identification as a feminist, seeking to channel the brave and strong women who have inspired and taught me. But at the same time, I also see this as a dismissal of a part of my authentic self-- some silencing of the part of me that carries fear and weeps with sorrow and rages at the injustices some police officers have committed. But in this moment while sitting among the police officers, I let the flat, strong face show, and kept the other more veiled. I was performing my own version of cool.

The gathering ended with heartfelt words from a man seated at the front in ordinary clothing, who obviously held important status in the community. He acknowledged that the next 10 days (through the New Year) are some of the most difficult, as people are often struggling with many different issues. He said something along the lines of “be safe out there” with some other generally encouraging words that I took to underscore a sort of us/ them stance. How did I fit in? By being here, I was identifying as one of “us,” wasn’t I? This rested uneasily in my thinking.

Then it was time to get going. Rick told me we were headed for the car, but first needed to stop at the armory to get a “non-lethal.” I repeated the words in my head, and realized that for me, this descriptor seemed to want a noun-- a non-lethal what? It felt like a mad-libs puzzle. A non-lethal popart? A non-lethal newsletter? We went to a small room, about the size of a good-sized walk-in closet, and Rick selected a non-lethal *weapon*, sleek and black with bright orange accents to indicate its one-step-up-from-what-Ralphie-wanted status. It could easily have been called a rifle or gun or firearm or shotgun, and I wondered why the name had been shorthanded to just “non-lethal.” It had multiple rounds of beanbags (in what looked like shotgun casings) attached. There was another big rack of other rifles that were all black, so I guessed those were all of the lethal variety. Rick was already wearing a handgun on his belt in a holster, and a taser in another little pouch. I was surprised to notice that in the armory, there was also an assortment of junky miscellany, including a baby’s car seat. A sign on the door reading Guns ‘n Stuff would not have been inappropriate.

As we made our way through the building towards the garage, we passed an indoor shooting range. I paused and peeked through the window, and saw several men (whom I recognized from the lobby earlier) wearing safety glasses and big protective earmuffs, talking and smiling. I didn’t linger. Instead, I jogged to catch up with Rick, and then attempted to gain status by mentioning my acquaintance with Mark (whose status within the department is quite prominent). I smiled broadly and said, “So you know Mark ___ right? Isn’t he great?” Nick wanly smiled in return and said, “Yeah, I guess.” I was immediately struck by the ease with which I was attempting to ingratiate myself, and found myself wondering why I was doing that. It was as if I was trying to become a toadie, maybe in an attempt to try out bonding in that world. That move didn’t work, so I fell silent.

We entered the garage, and Rick selected a car. I would have guessed officers have their own assigned cars (that they shared with just a couple others), but that’s not the case. I asked Rick how he chose, and he said, “I usually try to pick the one that looks the cleanest.” This was my first indication that “cleanliness” might be kind of important.

Because I had a camera with me, Sgt. Fry (who arranged the details of my ride along) suggested we take a “camera car.” This turned out to be one of the fleet that is equipped with a series of recording devices, including 5 cameras and audio recording that automatically activate in several circumstances, including when driving over 80 MPH, when the sirens and lights are activated, or in a crash. “Here, this one,” Rick said, pointing. I went to the passenger side, and reached for the door handle when another officer called over to me, “No, no, you ride in the back.” I paused, but then moved back and reached for the back-door handle when Rick stopped me, saying, “No, he’s teasing you. You don’t want to ride back there.”

I guffawed politely at the jesting, but was aware that in the moment, it felt like a power move on the part of the joking officer. I had the impression that Rick was still trying to read me, and I was aware that might be sending out a range of conflicting or unfamiliar signals. I recalled from my conversations in Turkey with Mark and Shelly that officers thrill at teasing and pranking one another, and it's a large part of law-enforcement culture. I was unsure as to whether this was their own interpretation of things within their own sub-communities, or whether this could be generalized to all officers (at least in my city). So was this other officer seeking to include me, somehow, by providing a more authentic, butt-of-the-joke experience? I obviously can't say, but did recognize that Rick made no similar efforts to prank or joke like that. So did this mean he was trying exclude me? Or perhaps did he recognize my unease with being teased (and thus placed in a vulnerable position)? Or possibly Rick isn't one who chose to participate in the generalized joking culture. Whatever the reason, I was glad, as that form of joking feels, to me, like a form of bullying. And if I (with all my privileges) were being bullied, how might this officer treat those he has arrested, perhaps under the label of "just kidding?"

Newly affirmed as a front-seated, I opened the passenger door of the car and was greeted with an overwhelming smell of what I can only describe as chocolate... lotion? It wasn't exactly a bad smell, but it was distinct, and enveloping. A big smell. Big. I got in, and although I am of average size for a white woman in the U.S., I found the space to be relatively compact, with a bit less wiggle room than I would find on a Southwest Airlines or Ryanair flight, with my knees resting surprisingly close to the dash. I didn't even try to adjust the seat, as the car was clearly crammed with an unfathomable number of different devices and what I took to be reinforcement-type things. I was actually a bit hesitant to touch anything, as I didn't know what (if anything) was off-limits.

Rick rummaged in the trunk, and I went to see what was in there. It turns out it had about 7 or 8 new or mostly-new boxes of latex gloves. So... several hundred latex gloves, blue. Pondering this, I got back in the car, and realized there was another box of gloves on the floor by my feet, taking up some precious foot-space. Rick said, "Oh, hand me that," so I reached down (trying to keep my face off the dash) and grabbed it. I handed it to him, and he then gave me a sanitizing wipe. I looked at him, puzzled, and he said, "That thing has had police shoes on it. And you don't know where police shoes have been." I tore open the little packet and did a Silk wood-style cleanse of my hands, including under my nails as the words "police shoes" echoed in my thoughts. Police shoes, walking through sorrow, pain, fear.

As I performed this hand-cleansing, Rick produced several more of these wipes, and began methodically cleaning the touch-surfaces inside the car. He wiped off the entire keyboard of the little mounted computer in the middle. He wiped off the buttons on the camera controller. He wiped off the steering wheel, the window control, and the radio buttons. As he did this, the words "self-care" came to mind, as he's exposed to all kinds of things, knowable and unknowable, and needs to look after his own health. I wondered if other officers are equally vigilant about keeping stuff as hygienic as possible. Working with the public puts one at risk, in many ways, and being proactive seems wise. His diligent wiping of the surfaces humanized him, framing him as a person who wants to stay healthy.

Rick then mounted the non-lethal rifle (the one with the orange flourishes) behind the seat beside a couple more almost-full boxes of blue latex gloves. I momentarily thought, "It's so excessively crowded in this car. He should just put that in the back seat, to keep it out of the way." I immediately realized how naïve I was about the work of police officers. They keep their weapons (lethal or otherwise) close at hand.

Then it was about 4:30 in the afternoon, and Rick was ready to go. But, I wondered, what does that even mean? Do we just drive around and look for drivers with burned out tail lights, or elderly folks who need help crossing the street? Or do we just sit quietly somewhere

and wait for a call? I honestly didn't know. Turns out, Rick said officers are free to pursue their own "special projects" until they're called for something. Special projects? This reminded me of another event in the "roll call" meeting earlier. Someone was retiring, so a special t-shirt had been created by another officer to humorously honor his career. It featured multiple visits to a local gourmet grocery store and also a special detour to the zoo-- both of which drew laughter and acknowledgement from the other officers. So... in pondering what "special projects" might be, my mind wandered to things like donuts, coffee, grocery stores, and the like. Rick clarified, however, explaining that for him, a special project might focus on getting heroin off the street. As we talked about how this is operationalized, he explained it's as easy as spending a few minutes in building rapport with people, and then just asking whether he can have a look in their pockets. Even though he was driving and also listening to the police scanner, he registered the surprise and confusion on my face, and modeled it for me. In a friendly, clear voice, he said, "So, ya mind if I take a look in your pocket and your backpack?" I scoffed and asked how that would help get heroin off the streets, and Rick shocked me by saying that most people agree and then allow him to search their pockets or bags, often spontaneously admitting something like, "My [drugs] are in this pocket here."

I was floored at the seeming normalness, the apparent casualness of this apparently common set of exchanges. I'm taken back to Urrieta's (2007) discussion of figured worlds, wherein he states, "Figured worlds are encountered in day-to-day social activity and lived through practices and activities. Identities are thus formed in the processes of participating in activities organized by figured worlds" (p. 109). So for Rick, this kind of exchange really *was* his version of reality, of normal, of the everyday. Having never been spontaneously asked this question (other than in a security line where I'm expecting it), I wonder how long I would hesitate before agreeing, especially if I'd just been having a friendly chat with the officer about the weather or sports. My instinct is that I would react with the deeply offended question, "Why?" but in truth, I don't know how I would respond. I hope I am never asked, and a part of me feels a sense of outrage on behalf of those who are.

We held this conversation while rolling through and around downtown, with the radio playing quietly in the background, with Owl City providing the ironic soundtrack for the moment. "It's always a good ti-ime!" Then the female voice from the scanner addressed Rick (by car number): a man with highlighter-colored hair and skull face-paint was standing on a street corner looking at people "menacingly." It was approaching rush hour, so Rick pointed the car in the direction of the alleged glarer and we slowly made our way to the designated spot. Once we arrived, we both scanned the crowds of pedestrians for someone matching that description, but all seemed, so Rick notified the dispatcher, and we resumed a rolling patrol of various neighborhoods, with Bruno Mars complaining of being locked out of heaven in the background, with the steady patter of the dispatcher talking to various cars in the foreground. The smell of chocolate lotion persisted, and it started to rain more assertively.

Ray

Next, the dispatcher notified Rick again, this time about an accident. Rick's brow furrowed at some of the details, and he began a one-handed instant-message conversation with another officer via his center-mounted computer. Rick's multitasking abilities were beginning to shine, as this was some fabulously coordinated driving/ typing/ talking/ listening going on. I was curious about what, exactly, they were saying over the instant messenger, but etiquette (and my culture) dictate that it's rude to read over someone's shoulder, so... I didn't look. I think the upshot was that Rick didn't want to go-- and within just a minute or two, another dispatcher announced a fight in front of the Nordstrom's downtown. Rick indicated to the dispatcher that we were close by, and so we moved in that direction with some urgency. The

dispatcher continued to provide information. Adult black male. Teenage boy. A girl. Pepper spray. Bleeding lip. Threatening with a belt.

When we arrived, there was already another police car there-- but Rick said fights warrant at least 2 cars. Traffic was a bit backed up, so he just put the car in park and left it running, with me inside. I think I could have followed him, but-- in this moment, I was struck by the reality of this ride-along-ing. I realized that officers encounter folks who are having troubles of some kind-- maybe they're troubled themselves, or maybe they're troubling someone else, maybe it's a totally organic form of trouble-- but whatever the case, I suddenly felt very weird at being an obvious gawker. It felt like, "Hi, I'm here for the sole purpose of gawking. At you. While you are having maybe one of the shittiest days of your week, or year, or of your life. Hey there." It just suddenly felt too voyeuristic, too much of a violation of whatever dignity that person/ those people might have. Or perhaps it was what Cohen (2001) describes as my "need to be innocent of a troubling recognition." So I sat in the car while Ke\$ha on the radio told me "we're gonna die young," and the dispatchers sent other cars to different parts of the city. I could see Rick and another officer up ahead, maybe 30 yards away, talking to an adult with a backpack. Traffic moved, but the cruiser sat, blocking all the traffic behind it. I watched the nearby valet parkers become flustered as the cruiser was blocking the entire pathway to folks wanting to come to their restaurant. Flo Rida on the radio got a good feeling, and I watched the wipers flick every few seconds.

After a bit, Rick returned to move the car, and told me he would probably be picking up the teenager involved in the fight because he had an outstanding warrant. I needed clarification: "Wait, he's coming in this car?" "Yeah." We moved up to the corner, and Rick pulled the car out of the way of traffic and then returned to talk with the teen and the other officer. Sitting in the idling cruiser, facing a busy crosswalk, I suddenly became aware that as people crossed the street, they looked at me, in the front seat of the car. I struggled to read their faces, their impressions, as some definitely did a double-take and showed curiosity. But curiosity and... what? I wondered if Rick felt that sense of conspicuousness, being so visible in this car, and could contrast it to his everyday life in normal clothes in a regular car. It made me think of my experience in the Peace Corps-- while living in southern Africa, I was glow-in-the-dark visible, and my presence and actions were constantly noted, observed, evaluated and commented on. But once I returned to the states, I became invisible again, blending smoothly into the human gravy that is the United States, just another face in the crowd. I wondered if Rick felt anything like this, the tension and differences between visible and invisible.

Rick and the teenager (whom I shall now call Ray), neared the car, and Rick began to search his backpack. I've had airport security go through my things more times than I care to recall, and I've had some pretty detailed inspections of my stuff, but Rick's examination of Ray's backpack contents seemed way more detailed. He opened chapsticks, he examined small objects. I could hear them talking, and although I was curious and wanted to look, to fully witness this interaction, I was again struck with the sense of looking-as-violation, and kept my eyes averted. I could hear Ray's adolescent timber, "I never punched him once. I did take off my belt and used it, like, as a backup threat." Then one of the back doors of the cruiser opened and momentarily sucked away the smell of the chocolate lotion. I felt the weight of Ray sitting down in the back, as he said, with what I took to be 100% sincerity, "Ah, it's so comfortable back here." The door slammed, and Ray fell silent.

We sat together, in silence, for about 10 minutes, just the two of us inside the car, while the rain slowly tapered off and Ricki Minaj sang about starships. I hadn't seen his face, but ... I knew him. Not him, exactly, but "him," as in all the other Rays I've met through my work, particularly with the Department of Juvenile Justice in Miami. I wanted, in that moment, to be his teacher, to hold steady eye contact, to listen to him, to provide an audience for whatever narrative he had to share-- but instead, rooted in my utterly unfamiliar and uncomfortable role,

I didn't say a single word. I honestly didn't know what the rules for this-- what I could or should say. Normal-me (and not ridealong-me) would have introduced myself, offered my handshake, shown him my listening face, been authentically present. Ridealong-me, this unfamiliar version of myself, listened to the dispatchers and Rihanna. Ray sat still and quiet, revealing no rage, no frustration, and no disappointment. He had sounded clear and lucid, and highly cooperative and compliant.

The rain mostly stopped, and Rick got into the car. "How do you spell your name, buddy?" Rick typed it into the computer, and got a few more details from Ray, and then we set out for the Precinct, which was just a couple minutes' drive away. "You know, every time I try to start working on my GED, I get arrested. This always happens." I learn that Ray is 16 years old, and his family lives another state. Ray lives at a shelter. He revealed that he wants to be a parole officer one day, "You know, to like help kids and stuff." The twists in this-- the framing of parole officers as "helping kids"-- are not lost on me.

We parked out front of the precinct, and Rick escorted both of us inside, but through a different entrance than before. We took a sharp right turn, and I noticed a tremendous stockpile of blue latex gloves. And gloves. And gloves. The mathematician in me did some quick calculations, and I realized there were over 20,000 gloves there, stacked up and ready for whatever biohazards might present themselves. (The words "police shoes" flashed through my thoughts again. Fluids. Fluids of sorrow, fear, pain).

Meanwhile, I again struggled to both look at and not look at Ray. Rick helped Ray out of his belt, and dropped it (along with Ray's bandana) on the floor outside a cell. Ray, pants now drooping, shuffled into the cell, which was a solid room with a built-in bench along one side, with two large rings affixed to it. Although I am not sure, I imagine the rings are so folks can be attached to them via their cuffs in some way. Ray was not attached to anything, and Rick shut the heavy door (which locked) and then wrote a few details on an adjacent whiteboard--Ray's name, and the word JUVENILE in large print.

We had brought Ray to the precinct because due to some of the (rather confusing) details of the altercation, there may have been a need for Ray to speak with a detective. I was told this might take a while, and Rick sat down at a computer to begin to fill out some of the paperwork. Meanwhile, a few other officers drifted around, including one who visited the door of Ray's cell and peered through the peephole. Rick multitasked, talking on his cellphone to various people while also reviewing his notes and pecking information into the computer.

The "Tooth"

As I contemplated the gazillions of gloves, the doors opened and 5 men walked in-- 4 of them wearing rain-dotted hoodies with POLICE t-shirts underneath, a couple in need of a shave (or just rocking that urban-style scruff), escorting a man in handcuffs with a downturned face. Again, look or don't look? I let my eyes linger for a moment, but was then compelled to politely look away. As they passed me and moved down a short corridor, I allowed my gaze to return. What the heck was I looking at? The 4 guys in hoodies were apparently officers, but they were wearing ordinary clothes-- jeans or dockers, regular shoes, baseball caps-- but each one had a secret-service-type earpiece, with a coiled cord disappearing down into their collars. As I looked at them from behind, I noticed subtle angular bulges around their waists, and concluded these men must be some kind of plainclothes officers.

They congregated back by the cells, and apparently put man in handcuffs (whose name I never heard) into one. I stood by a recycling bin, again attempting to affect an air of placid comfort and ease, contemplating the various bulletin boards in the room, including one that featured a motorcycle for sale. As I engaged in this standing meditation, reflecting upon the familiarity of the bulletin board and the computers and the unfamiliarity of this whole field of

work, one of the Plainclothes Officers (as I now thought of them) walked past me, cupping something in his blue-gloved hands. I peeked, and saw that he was carrying.... a tooth. A, big, hunky, kind of misshapen molar, yellowy-white. Maybe from an animal other than a person, because of its size. But... what? Seriously, what the HELL? A TOOTH? Gloves, right, of course. Now I got it. Of course they need gloves. Because... you might end up touching a giant dislodged molar.

A minute or two later, the molar-holding-guy (whom I will now call Keith) addressed me. "Hey, Ridealong." Huh? Oh, that's ME. Ridealong. Just like the non-lethal, I am no longer a noun, just a descriptor. In this naming of me, I was immediately made to think of Urrieta's (2007) commentary on figured worlds, wherein he explains, "When positioned, people are not so much engaged in self-making, but rather are limited to varying degrees of accepting, rejecting, or negotiating the identities being offered to them" (p. 111). I was being offered the identity as Ridealong, and it rested uneasily.

Keith continued. "You seemed pretty curious about this. Have you ever seen crack cocaine before?" and he held his cupped hand close, with the tooth resting placidly within. I struggled to make sense of what I was seeing, as upon closer inspection, I realized it was not a tooth, but what looked like a chunk of clear plastic resin with whitish fishtank gravel suspended in it. It took a few beats of scrutiny for me to realize that it was actually a bunch of fishtank-gravel-type stuff wrapped up in a piece of saran wrap. "Oh, um [Damn that looks like a tooth, but don't say tooth, does it always look like a tooth?], no, I haven't. Wait, can I see that again?" [Yeah, definitely not a tooth.] He then explained the reason for his attire-- he and the others are on the "street crimes" patrol, and if they simply zip their jackets and raise the hoods (obscuring the giveaway earpieces), they look like 1001 other folks in this city. He said they go together in an ordinary (non-police but police-owned) vehicle and just chill, watching folks. Then when something happens, they just unzip and reveal their official tshirts (that say POLICE in big letters) and more importantly, their official badges and the other stuff around their waists. Who knew? Zipped, they look like half the people on my bus every day, my neighbors, my graduate students. Plainclothes officers as purloined letters. I found myself unsure in how I felt about that, knowing officers might be anywhere, surveilling. Part of me felt offended and insulted; part of me felt unsurprised, given the big-brother world I've grown up in; part of me felt comforted as back in my pre-feminist days when I thought (as I was taught) that men protect women. Confusing, to say the least.

Then, to my surprise, Keith invited me to watch him perform a test on what I now thought of as the faux-tooth to see if it was, indeed, crack cocaine. Still fully gloved, he set up a little testing zone on the table next to the printer. He produced what initially looked like a small tube of lotion, but turned out to be the test-kit, which contained 3 vials of particular chemicals. He carefully opened up the tooth, took out a piece of the fishtank-gravel, and dropped it into the lotion-tube thing. He then squeeze-smashed the first vial, then the second, then the third, and gave it a little shake. He showed me the color indicators (pink = something, blue = something else, pink AND blue = crack cocaine). Within a few seconds, the liquid turned pink AND blue, layered like a snow cone or a pregnancy test kit gone awry. It was real.

Ray, In Transit

By then it was decided that Ray (the teenager) needed to be taken to the Juvenile Detention Center, as there was also an adult back there--the unnamed man in handcuffs (although in a different cell, completely out of sight). So Rick collected him and we got back into the car and headed across the river to the JDC, through surprisingly heavy traffic for around 7 PM on a Friday evening. Rick flipped through different screens on his computer, checking to see if there had been some accident or something while I marveled as this access to so many

types of information. From the back seat, Ray commented, “I think I got taller. Last time I was in this car, I fit differently.” “It’s always a good time” hummed from the radio again as Rick warmly chatted with Ray. I noted that I felt grateful Rick was so good at building quick rapport with Ray, and hoped other folks responded to Rick’s efforts with the same warmth.

We pulled up to the JDC and Rick bypassed the regular parking lot and drove towards a secured gate. It opened for him and we circled to a back entrance. After being buzzed into the almost-silent wing of the building, we were greeted by 2 staff members-- a white woman and an Asian man, both low-key and friendly. The woman knew Ray, and semi-teasingly asked him about some family events (evidence of Ray’s prior visit or visits to this place) as the man handed Ray a pair of orange rubber slippers. Without missing a beat and needing no instruction, Ray chatted with the woman as he sat down on a bench and removed his shoes, placing them on the counter beside his backpack.

Rick talked with the woman about some paperwork details, as he walked behind the counter and got a few squirts of hand sanitizer, as he had carried Ray’s backpack inside. Meanwhile, Ray had begun his intake processing with the man, whom I noted was addressing Ray with incredible gentleness, respect and calm. This was a humane situation, which stood out after much of what I witnessed in Miami with similar circumstances wherein teenagers were gruffly ordered around, shouted at, and generally treated rudely and roughly. I was deeply moved at the kindness with which Ray was being treated, and hoped this was how it always goes. Ray was pleasant, cooperative, and friendly. Warmth begets warmth, it seemed.

After a full (but truly gentle and respectful, not aggressive) frisking and a look inside Ray’s mouth, they went through Ray’s belongings. “Any money?” No, none. “Any drugs?” No. “You got a belt?” Yeah, it’s already off. It’s there under the backpack. Everything was inventoried, and written down in a chart. Shoes, black. Backpack, black with red stripes. Belt, blue.

Ray was then asked a series of questions that transitioned from informational to a quick mental health screening. I was silently applauding (again, looking while trying not to look, feeling torn at my voyeurism) at how respectfully the questions were both worded and intoned. “What languages do you speak?” English and Spanish. “Do you wear glasses or contacts?” No. “Do you consider yourself male, female, or both?” Male. “Do you like boys, girls, both or neither?” Girls. “Do you use drugs?” Yes. “Which drugs?” Marijuana and crystal meth. “Are you high right now?” No. “Do you have anything to look forward to when you leave our facility?” Yeah, I want to work on my GED....

“Have a seat. We’ll photograph you in a second and then I’ll get you a sack lunch.” Oh, the look on his face at the words “sack lunch.” It’s true, I was looking. I was full-on gawking at this moment, although he carefully avoided eye contact with me. I saw his face flicker with such positivity at the words “sack lunch” that it made my own stomach do a sad flip. He came so sharply into focus-- 16 years old, family lives in another state, lives in a shelter, zero dollars in his possession, 4 days before Christmas... “Hey, how long do I stay here?” At least through the weekend. “Really? Oh, okay. That’s cool.” My heart ached for him, and for the other Rays in this building.

Beyond this sorrow and frustration at the trajectories of Ray and the other teenagers there, I was taken aback at how much access I had to intimate details of this teenager’s life and identity. I was present as his private details—name, date of birth, social security number, sexual preferences, criminal history, and more—were reviewed. No one flinched or suggested I step away or even pretend not to hear—this relatively public reviewing of his life was jarring, saddening. I wonder how it felt to be him, exposed in this way, maybe not for the first time.

Rick and I left Ray in the capable care of the staff at the JDC, and headed back towards Rick’s assigned part of the city, with Bruno Mars getting locked out of heaven again (Oh yeah yeah yeah, yeah. Ooh!). I was finally getting to ask some questions and learn a bit about his

path that led to this point, and how it feels to do this job, and how his family sees his work, and what opportunities and frustrations exist-- but then the dispatcher announced something relevant: an altercation of some kind in front of a downtown hotel I'd never heard of. Before I knew it, Rick had activated lights and sirens, and leaned into the accelerator pedal. I felt a box of blue latex gloves shift behind me as we rounded a corner, swinging onto a bridge to cross back over into downtown. I noticed Rick working the siren, doing different things with it as we approached each red-light intersection (which, somehow, it seemed there was never a green light). The siren was surprisingly quiet inside the car--- WEE OOOH WEEE OOOH WEEE OOOH while rolling between intersections, but then (with Rick's activation) ERRR ERRR ERRRRR ERRR to make the cars stop as we blew through the reds. Once we reached the downtown area, traffic was backed up, so Rick unflinchingly took us *around* the traffic by driving the wrong way down several blocks, siren still screaming. I jerkily scribbled the words "FANTASY DRIVING" in my little notebook, as Rick was doing all the things I always wished for when stuck in traffic. I will confess that it was exhilarating, which, upon reflection, see that it is linked to privilege. In this moment, I didn't need to wait in the long lines of traffic with everyone else-- I was in the car that got to break and make the rules. Such tension--delight at the privileged status, but sorrow at knowing it's undeserved, appropriated, unearned.

Brian

We rolled up in front of the worn-out looking hotel, and Rick suggested I wait there-- which, again, suited me perfectly, as I found I was sensitive to the idea of violating someone's life by witnessing things like this. Apparently an intoxicated man had (assaulted? harassed?) a woman, and she was waiting out front. We parked next to the giant-sized dumpster that was directly in front of the hotel, and Rick sprang out, leaving me with the dispatchers, along with Pitbull on the stereo.

Rick returned pretty quickly, and said the guy had walked off, and we were going to drive around a little and look for him. "He's wearing an orange jacket." As the streets were full of folks strolling around (on a Friday evening downtown, there is a lot of foot traffic), I thought it was a lost cause and Orange Jacket Guy (or Brian, as I will now call him) would probably never be heard from again. I pictured us looking for a few minutes and then moving on to the next call, whatever it might be, and I pictured him, anonymously stalking off into the rain, getting on with his life.

We circled the block, and I half-heartedly scanned the pedestrians for Brian in his orange jacket. Everyone seemed to be wearing something the color of wet-- nothing orange in sight. Rick abruptly stopped the car, and looking towards a cluster of people in a bus shelter, said, "That might be him right there." He stepped out of the car and approached a man in an orange jacket and a rosary as a necklace. He said, "Are you Brian?" "Naw, man." Rick got back in the car, and we continued for less than a minute before the dispatcher announced that Brian had returned to the hotel. We hurriedly whipped back around the block, and Rick threw the car into park and moved quickly out of my sight, behind the dumpster that marked the hotel entrance. I noticed 2 other police cruisers already there. I was alone in the car with Maroon 5.

At some point, Rick pulled up the most recent mugshot of Brian on the car's computer. Again, I felt that I should avert my gaze, but at the same time, I was compelled to study his image on the computer screen, looking resigned and somber, weathered and tired. I noted he was younger than me, and younger than my brother, too, but looked worn and weary, his face creased and drooping. I realized that having a mugshot meant he had been arrested before. How does that happen, to be arrested more than once? Personal information was there, too—his full name, his date of birth. I felt voyeuristic in looking at his image and details.

Suddenly, out of my sight (behind that boxcar-sized dumpster), something happened to

cause Brian to need to be arrested. I do not know what, exactly. What I do know is that several officers brought him over to our car and had him bent over the trunk. The car shook and bounced as Brian and several officers apparently kind of wrestled. Multiple voices spoke with urgency, layering one voice atop another. "Hey, hey! Relax!" "Stop resisting! You're just making it worse for yourself!" "You need to chill!" "You need to calm down!" In a deeply disturbing way, it reminded me of images seen on the news and described by those who have experienced police aggression. And now, here was some version of this, literally shaking the car in which I was sitting. And then whoosh, the door opened, drawing out the chocolate lotion smell, and the weight of the car shifted, and Brian settled into the back seat. The door slammed, closing us in. Brian sniffed once, and then fell silent. I was silent, too. Was he ok? Was he expecting me to say something or do something? Was he frightened? Was he angry? Was he intoxicated? Was he mentally ill? Maroon 5 sang to us, "I'm a payphone, trying to call home..." I realized that his bleak portrait was still up on the computer screen and wondered if he could see it from the back seat. I wondered if he looked like that right now. I wondered what I looked like to him. I wondered if he was ok, and what happened in his life to bring him to this moment.

I noticed at least 2 more (maybe 3?) police cars behind us, totaling 5 or 6 now. I wondered what passerby must have thought happened. I, myself, wondered what happened. Rick suddenly got in the car and looked at his own eye in the rearview as only folks with eye-distress are known to do. Eye distress, not good. He got out and shut the door. I heard a voice on the dispatch radio saying "...small cut on his forehead, and uh..." when Rick opened the door again. Then I noticed that it was Rick with a small cut on his forehead, and the person talking on the radio was another officer, standing right outside the car. It was disorienting to see his mouth moving and his voice coming from the disembodied radio-- so much so that I forgot to listen to what he was saying. Rick again examined his eye in the mirror, and muttered a curse under his breath before getting out again. His contact lens had gotten up into the wrong part of his eye. Something happened that had either led to OJ Guy being arrested or had happened during the struggle at the back of the car. Upshot: Rick had been injured by Brian, and Rick was going to press charges. I knew that assaulting a police officer is a pretty serious crime, and Brian's life was going to change in some way because of this night.

Time passed. I sat quietly with Brian. Waiting. Wondering what all the officers were doing, wondering what was going to happen next, wondering about the cut on Rick's head, wondering if Brian was going to say something, or, I don't know, sigh or cry. Up ahead, I saw a big firetruck, a ladder truck, slowly roll past on the narrow cross street, and it reminded me of a dinosaur lumbering through a tightly grown jungle. Oldish part of town, not originally intended for big ladder trucks.

More waiting. Chris Brown, Katy Perry, Kanye, Jay-Z, Drake. Me and Brian, sitting quietly, meditatively, breathing chocolate lotion smell together. I wondered what would happen if he needed to use the bathroom. Then a small circle of officers gathered in front of our car, and I realized there were 2 firefighters in the mix now as well. That ladder truck... it must have been bringing these firefighters. I recognized some of the other officers from roll call earlier. One of the firefighters was holding an arm-sized bag of saline. Another held a flashlight. Rick was being examined. His eye, his cut. The firefighter irrigated Rick's eye, working to dislodge that obviously painfully misplaced contact lens.

At 8:14 PM, Rick had his cut photographed by another officer. Rick opened the door and tossed a VHS tape onto the dash. Maybe it's the hotel's footage? Do people still use VHS? Actually, maybe this hotel, which (I later learned through google) has ONLY smoking rooms, which I find curiously old-fashioned, like VHS. I wonder what was on that tape. Probably something featuring Brian?

At around 8:30-ish, Rick apologizes to me and explains that the ride-along will be ending early (now, in fact) because he needs to go to the hospital. I more than fully understand-

- there's really no way he can be expected to be alert and sharp with a contact way up in bad-orbit in his eye, and his forehead is sporting a small open wound-- not ideal for any of the possible encounters he may have later in the evening. We bid one another farewell, and I thank him with all my sincerity. Another officer will drive me back to the precinct (where I had parked my car) and then carry on with Brian to wherever he's going.

The next officer (a woman whose name I instantly forgot, but whom I recognized from the roll call) was just as friendly and personable as Rick, but our ride lasted literally only 3 minutes or so. We said goodnight, and I stepped out into the fresh night air, leaving the chocolate-lotion-smell and Brian behind, and moved back into my familiar life, just another pedestrian on the streets of this city.

Anita (That's Me)

So what, then, might all this mean for me, an educator working to foster and nurture risk-taking and boundary-crossing in herself and in her students? As I reflect upon this exercise wherein new aspects of my privilege were brought to the foreground, I see it as a kind of desocialization, as explained by Walton (2011), "By unmasking contradictions embedded within privileged constructions of knowledge, desocialization holds the possibility of not only questioning well-established, internalized belief systems, but challenging a person's sense of selfhood as well" (p. 774). This re-jiggering of my selfhood was profound, and I realized, more deeply than ever before, that I am a person generally uncomfortable with absolutes. I live in the world of the tentative, the negotiable, and the world of "it depends." The world of law enforcement, although at times able to acknowledge gray areas, does function primarily on the baseline idea that there exists good and there exists bad-- a binary conceptualization with the stipulation that those who break rules will face consequences. But as I reflect upon the whole experience, I find the idea of rules to be complicated, even though at root I understand and believe they are in place to protect me (and my privilege, again).

I realized sometime during the ride that I was perhaps not the typical person who engaged in a ride-along. I had the sense (perhaps a projection) that Rick was a bit disappointed in my lack of apparent enthusiasm. Although I was curious and engaged, I was definitely cautious in voicing support for the work of police. Rick indicated that many folks who ride along are typically interested in some particular aspect of law enforcement, either stemming from a life-long passion or curiosity, or perhaps as an aspirational goal in some way. I wasn't interested in attempting to perform this role; I was a grudging ally at best, haunted with a distrust the media and countless authors of color had provided me about this work.

A related idea that stands out to me is my hesitation in making any remarks here, in writing, that might be taken as criticism of or insult to the work of the police, in spite of what I may think or believe (particularly through the accounts of others who are afforded less privilege than that which is afforded to me, unwarranted). I see this linked, again, to what I consider to be my privileged relationship with Mark and his relative position of power as a high-ranking member of the police department. Although I don't expect to ever be in a situation wherein I may need police intervention or support, if I were, I would probably invoke my friendship with Mark as a way to possibly secure additional privilege. Does this mean that, for this example, I've failed in my goal to challenge injustice? Maybe. I have work to do, clearly.

However, I do see that this experience pushed me to identify new facets of my privilege and to allow them to haunt my thinking. It is my hope that in this acknowledgement, this knowing and naming of my privilege, I can somehow draw from the wisdom of McIntosh (1988) and "choose to use unearned advantage to weaken hidden systems of advantage" and use my "arbitrarily awarded power to try to reconstruct power systems on a broader base" (p. 192). I'm not entirely sure how to go about this, but I'm working on it. How would you do it?

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