

## As I Remember

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This is a volume of stories, memoir, and essays.

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### Lunch

When I started writing stories, I was surprised at how often race emerged as a theme. Some of the stories were of my childhood and some were set contemporaneously. In both old and new, race, black and white, was present.

I have been reticent about those stories. The role of race is based, primarily, on my white family's relations with black people. We are Southern. I grew up in Cary, North Carolina, born in 1954. Cary is notorious today as thriving, monied city. It is a center, amongst other things, of South Asian Indian immigrants – and Yankees.

In 1954 Cary was a small town; my father was Mayor.

I am reticent about my stories because what was then looks different to society 60 years later. I am reticent, also, because I am a white male, and I think that maybe we have heard enough from white males. I write now because I feel that I can write, simply, as an observer, a narrator.

I write, as well, for other reasons. Today, 2018, race shares the forefront with many issues. President Trump has helped place race at a dividing forefront, but the return to the forefront started with President Obama. In the first year of Obama's election, I would wake every morning worried he had been shot. I imagined James Earl Ray with a cheap rifle.

An important book is *Klansville, USA*, by sociologist David Cunningham.<sup>1</sup> I was shocked by this book and the fact that during the 1960s the Ku Klux Klan in North Carolina had by far the largest number of members of any state – comparable to *all* other states. North Carolina, to my mind, was the progressive Southern State of Luther Hodges, Terry Sanford, and people like my father the mayor of Cary. Education was policy.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://global.oup.com/academic/product/klansville-usa-9780199752027?cc=us&lang=en#>

I was more shocked hearing Cunningham interviewed, that in the 1960s there was much Klan activity in Apex, the town a few miles from Cary, out Chatham Street, to the south and west.

I had been told, as an adult, that when the Raleigh Beltline, US highways 1 and 64, was being built in the 1950s, Cary High Students would go watch cross burnings on the land that had been cleared for the road.

I definitely remember the presence of the Klan as a child of the 1960s. Every week there seemed to be Klan rallies. There was the talk of Grand Dragons and Imperial Wizards. These rallies were often in the cities of the eastern part of the state – places I often passed through.

At home, I was told that these rallies were, perhaps, an anachronism, a dying culture. I did not need to fear them. In my child head, I saw them like the Grand Poobah of the cartoon *Flintstones*.

In *Klansville, USA*, Cunningham wrote about the 1960s surge of the Klan as the third cycle of the Klan. As we moved towards 2016, I viewed us as moving towards a fourth, more sophisticated, more pernicious cycle. My view aside, we now have race at the forefront and Donald Trump as President.

In the 1960s my father was often hiring men to help with his projects and women to help with the children. My mother, who died in 1959, worked full time as a teacher; she spent her last years full time being sick as well. My father remarried to a physician, also a full-time worker.

My father hired whites and blacks, but mostly blacks. In hindsight, some were, essentially, homeless. Daddy's projects often involved small pieces of land on the coast, old phone poles, and the occasional abandoned railway trestle. There was driving around, and there was stopping for lunch. This first story is about stopping for some lunch. This is story, every event in the story is, in fact, true, but the particular composite of truths is fiction.

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John McLean<sup>2</sup>

Daddy, cousin Micky and I were loading a trailer full of old creosoted bridge pilings to take down to the North Carolina coast to build a new cabin. Really all I could do was to help pass the rope from one side of the trailer to the other. My hands were too small to tie good knots in the stiff three-quarter-inch rope they were using; I couldn't pull it tight around the rough wood.

"You seen John McLean this morning?" Daddy asked.

"John McLean's coming with us?" I asked back.

John McLean was one of several men who occasionally worked for Daddy. They'd come and go over the years, not seeming to have a home. John McLean, never John, never Mr. McLean, had the blackest skin of any man I knew. The soft, deep wrinkles on his face so completely absorbed the light that they looked like layered curtains. His teeth were crooked, stained, and rotting; his eyes were red and limp. He always wore a tattered blue suit coat. Right now, he was staying in the house that had been my grandmother's.

"Not yet," Micky yelled across the trailer to answer Daddy. While walking lines for the phone company, Micky had come across this old train bridge, decaying in a ravine. He'd worked for the phone company ever since he'd graduated from high school about ten years ago. Micky was always coming across treasures out in the woods, and we saw the old bridge as a divine sign to build Daddy's dream of a hurricane-proof cabin over on Core Sound.

"I haven't seen him either," I shouted, since I was on Daddy's deaf side. I watched Micky loop a lark's head over the end of a log, then around the frame of the trailer. Daddy called Micky a bull because he was so strong - said all that he ate turned straight to muscle. "You think we're going have any trouble getting lunch?" I asked.

I craved eating at Bunky's, and we'd had trouble before on trips when John McLean was along. About four years ago on the way down to Wilmington, the same group of us had had to stop at

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<sup>2</sup> A version of this story appeared in the online version of Current Magazine (Ann Arbor, MI, <http://www.ecurrent.com/>) in Spring 2006. That archive is no longer available.

a place where we'd never been before. Daddy told us to sit in the car while he checked to see if we could eat there.

Micky and I had gotten out of the car and sat on the hood. John McLean sat cooking in the back seat with his window rolled up. The restaurant was a flat-roofed cinder block building with a smaller building off to the side. The tree-bare white gravel parking lot was dotted with dried clumps of grass and ran to the edge of a field full of curled dusty corn. This man came and looked out the front door and shook his head. Daddy came back and said that they wouldn't even let John McLean eat back in the kitchen with the cooks. When he asked for something to go, the man had locked the door to the carry out and turned the sign to "Closed."

Micky then said, "I'll be back in minute, Uncle Waldo," and walked towards the kitchen door at the side of the restaurant. The man, who had been in the front door, walked around and stood in front of the kitchen door. The man back stepped; Micky pushed the door open with his left forearm. About five minutes later, Micky came back to the car with a bag of sandwiches, barbeque scooped on soft white buns with a dollop of slaw. We rode down the road, with no appetite, not saying a word. I didn't even tell Micky that I didn't like slaw on my sandwich. When Daddy finally started to talk again, it was about Johnson and Goldwater, and that if Goldwater was elected President then he thought the country would fall apart. Now it was 1968 and there was another campaign going on, this time, with Humphrey, Nixon, and Governor Wallace.

As we finished tying up the trailer John McLean walked up. "Hello, boy," he said, his words riding on puffs that smelled like the fermenting scuppernongs on the ground in late October. "It's going to be a hot trip today. Hot, hot, day." With John McLean present Daddy either forgot about my question about lunch or just didn't want to answer.

"Yeah, John McLean," I said. "It's a hot day."

"How's school? You been reading your Bible?" John McLean asked me these things every time he saw me. We climbed into the back seat; I rolled down the window to ease the smell. "You better go to school boy," he said. "A boy's got to learn." He pulled out a penknife and trimmed a ragged thumbnail out the window.

My friend Franklin said that John McLean was a filthy, dangerous man, who carried a switchblade. Franklin had come

over a couple of days ago wearing a big red, white and blue button that said, "If I Was 21, I'd Vote For Wallace." He wanted to fight about Daddy putting up a big Humphrey poster in the downtown office he rented out to the Democrats.

While Franklin and I were arguing on the front porch, John McLean had come to the door with his water bottles. When it was hot he carried two Mason jars. We filled them up for him in the morning with mostly ice and some water, and he'd carry them around. He'd run dry. I asked him to come in, but he said that he didn't want to. I brought him the jars with ice and water and gave him some more water in one of Daddy's large tea glasses. "Your daddy's a fool to let a nigger like that live in town," he'd said. Then he told me that John McLean got drunk and killed somebody over at *The Shack*, the colored club out on the edge of town. "You going to use that glass again?" Franklin asked.

We drove down the highway annoying people with our slow long trailer full of dark timber. I read my stack of *MAD* magazines and kept glancing over at John McLean. He was looking out the window. Once we were down the road a bit, he reached into his coat pocket and started searching around. The top of a crumpled brown bag came out of his pocket, and he stuffed it back real fast. He looked over at me and made this little closed-mouth laugh and turned to look out the window again. As we rode by this little clump of houses John McLean looked back over to me. Then he arched up and, again, dug into his pants pocket. "Come over here closer," he said. "I got something to ask you."

He stopped searching in his pants pocket and reached to the inside pocket of his old suit jacket. Out came a folded tatter of paper and a nubbin of a pencil. "Where are we, boy?" He said.

"Princeton," I said.

He steadied the piece of paper on back of Daddy's seat and wrote down the name of the town. "I like to keep a list of all the places I've been," he said. "Where we going next?" "Well, we'll be going to Goldsboro, then Lagrange, Kinston, Dover, then New Bern."

"How you know all of that?"

"I've been down here a lot, but it's all on the map." I picked up a torn map from the floor of the car and unfolded it. I showed him the red line of US 70 running from Raleigh to New Bern to Morehead. I said, "We'll take this highway to Havelock, then take NC 101 down through Harlowe, then go through the country to Smyrna and Marshallberg. I can name all of the creeks and rivers we'll cross, and we'll cross the Neuse River two or three times, depending on which way we go. Here, you want this map? We can get more at the gas station if we need a new one."

John McLean took the map. He studied it. "This blue the ocean?" he asked. "We going to see the ocean?"

"Maybe," I said.

"Thank you, boy," he said. With his finger John McLean smoothed the tears in the map, slowly folded it, and carefully put it in his inside coat pocket. "Your Daddy took me to see the ocean once," he said. "I like the way it smelled." At every cluster of houses, he'd ask me where we were, and he'd scribble some letters for the name of each community and town. After a couple of hours Daddy said, "We'd better be stopping for some lunch. Let's eat at Bunky's, then take Highway 55 because the traffic's lighter. There's no place to eat over on 55."

We pulled into Bunky's Barbeque. We went around the restaurant and stopped under an oak tree in a sandy lot behind the main parking area. Daddy was expert at knowing where to go so that he'd never have to back up the trailer.

"This is the best barbeque, John McLean," I said.

"Oh, I don't spect no restaurant make the best barbque."

"Well, it's the best I've ever had."

"No, no. Maybe you can bring me some out, though. I think I'd like to sit under this ole tree, where it's cool. Hard to find a cool place on a day like today."

"It's cooler inside than it is out here. It's air-conditioned."

"I don't like the kind of cool they have inside; it give me a chill. Not good to get so cold on a summer day."

John McLean went to sit under the tree. Daddy went to the takeout part of the counter and ordered John McLean a half-chicken and barbeque platter. I ran it out to him. A couple of other black men had joined him, and John McLean's brown bag sat on the ground between them. I gave him his lunch and went back inside with Daddy and Micky. Micky and I ordered tea, and Daddy ordered coffee - "If it's hot," he said.

"John McLean must be crazy to want to eat out there in that heat," I said.

"I reckon that's just the way he's used to," Daddy said. "Bunky, here, has always let coloreds eat inside, but you only occasionally see one down at the end of the counter," he tilted his head to point at the end of the counter as he talked. There, at the end of the long Formica counter, a lone dark figure sat, and behind him were four other black men sitting quietly at a table. None of the other tables near them were occupied.

Micky leaned back and emptied his big glass of tea in one swallow and started to fill it again from the pitcher on the table. "You remember that SOB in that place on the way down to Wilmington?"

"Micky, what happened in that restaurant? You and Daddy wouldn't ever tell me."

"It was sort of funny, actually. I was going to punch that kid when he said, 'You and your car of nigger lovers just get on down the road and there won't be no trouble.'"

Daddy looked at Micky with one of those looks he usually used on me and said, "You know I don't abide by that word."

"That's the way he said it, and it's not the worst thing he said."

"You use it too comfortable."

"Sorry," Micky said. He sat up straight and pulled his chair to the table. He played with the salt and pepper shakers for a minute. Silent. Then he continued, "So, I was standing in the door with this kid in front of me and all the colored help behind him. Then this big older Negro walked over from the stove and handed me a bag. The owner guy said, 'Nate, don't give that so-and-so lover that bag. You git uppity like those Greensboro so-and-so's and you won't have no job.'"

While Micky talked, I watched the counter waitress. She walked down the counter putting fresh hushpuppies in baskets of all the people eating there. She didn't walk down to the end.

"Anyway," Micky went on after draining another glass of tea, "Nate hands me the bag and turned around and looked at the kid, who wasn't any older than me, maybe 22. Then he said, 'Sonny, you want to fight that man to keep him from getting barbeque?' Then the kid turned around and walked out of the kitchen. I gave Nate a whole ten-dollar bill."

"That was mighty fine barbeque," Daddy said.

"Yeah," I said, "even with the slaw on it it was good."

At the end of the counter a black woman came from the kitchen and filled up the few tea glasses and hushpuppy baskets in her back corner of the restaurant. We ate both chicken and pig, and then Daddy had a bowl of peach cobbler with his last cup of coffee.

"Daddy," I said. "Franklin says everyone thinks you're a fool to let John McLean stay over at Grandma's. Says he's an endangerment."

"You tell Franklin he doesn't know enough to know what a fool is."

"He says John McLean killed a man a couple of weeks ago.

"Nobody's been killed anywhere," Daddy said. He looked over at Micky, then back at me. Then he started talking again, "Franklin's going around wearing that fool Wallace button, boasting like ... " He stopped in mid-sentence. Then, he just sat, staring past me, across the dining room and the Formica counter. "Let's go," he said and snatched up the check. After paying, we went outside, and John McLean was sitting on the back of the trailer waiting.

As we drove on down the road, I tried to hear Daddy and Micky in the front seat, but with the open windows there wasn't much listening. Mostly, I looked for the creeks. I'd never been down Highway 55. All of the creeks that crossed US 70 made it to 55 on their way to the Neuse. Cove Creek and Bachelor Creek were much wider, with dark still water. There were even some small wooden boats, and on the banks, black men fishing.



John McLean slept in his sweet rotten-grape cloud, and I wrote down a list of all the new places we went through.

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John McLean was a real person. He would come in summer year after year. Daddy would, one day, say, "John McLean is back." Where he came from, I don't know. Daddy implied he had "people" somewhere for the winter. Daddy also said John McLean had a camp in the woods, at least, at times.

Of the men who worked for Daddy, John McLean was most discomfoting. He was tattered and worn. His teeth were broken; he seemed unsteady, erratic. I would watch him working in our back yard from the second story windows of the house. He had a secret. He would work a while and then walk to one of the piles of metals or wood that were collected in the yard. He would dig through the pile and pull out his secret in a bag. One evening after he left, I dug through the pile and found a bottle of wine that smelled like grape juice.

Alcoholism was alien to me. It was not until I was in my late 40s that I connected his secret with alcoholism. Sobriety did not seem to be a requirement for his duties.

John McLean did, at times, live in the ancient house where my maternal grandmother had lived. Daddy had bought the house from the estate. It was in bad shape, and in his practical way, to contain the rot, Daddy put a new roof on the house. The house was mostly abandoned, and the place of teenage boys. There was their detritus, Playboy Magazines, spent matches, and discarded bottles and cans. John McLean was to be caretaker and grass cutter. The role he played in the burning of the house is for another story.

In the early 1970s, not long after Interstate 40 opened on the north side of Cary, John McLean was killed riding his bicycle. No family appeared to claim his body, and Daddy took responsibility. After finding an estate of several thousand dollars saved from years of work, family appeared.

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## Privilege

Ta-Nehisi Coates in *Between the World and Me*<sup>3</sup> describes the fear and danger from society faced by African Americans every day. It is a state of disprivilege.

It is hard to write about privilege. It is not to boast – look what I have. It is not for self-aggrandizement. Objectively, more than sixty years of life in the United States makes it clear that I have privilege. Privilege is different from being fortunate, being blessed, being lucky, or being rich. Historically, the United States has been set up in way that makes is easier for me, as a white man, to succeed.

This set up, preconditioning, has not relieved me of hard work. Nor does it not mean that all white men are successful.

I have worked in several organizations. I have been in organizations where the bean counters and rule makers worked to allow me to be successful. To the contrary, I have seen the accounting and rules set up in ways that are barriers to success. When organizations did not work for me and others to be successful, I was in a position to challenge the organization.

In the broader narrative that exists arounds Coates' books, I have heard some rules for African Americas navigating the world. For example, when driving and pulled over by the police, turn off the music, turn on the inside light, roll down your window, and sit with your hands clearly visible on the steering wheel. When you buy something in a store get a bag, take your receipt. Perhaps, make sure the bag is stapled, the receipt visible on the outside. Do not take an empty bag into a store. Don't pick up items in the store unless you intend to buy them.

These are the same rules I heard repeatedly growing up. That does not mean that the rules apply in the same way.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/220290/between-the-world-and-me-by-ta-nehisi-coates/9780812993547/>

## Small Cherry Pepsi

In 1960, Cary had two main streets, Chatham Street and Academy Street. The intersection was our origin point; it defined Cary's east, west, north, and south. The few businesses were strung along Chatham, which also served as U.S. Highways 1 and 64. Academy Street ended to the south at our famous academy. At its northern end, Academy Street ended in the "colored" part of town.

We lived on Academy Street, a block and a half south of the intersection. At age 5, I was already known for sitting at the cash register at the Piggly Wiggly. Many afternoons, the owner of the appliance store, Mr. Hobby, would give me a nickel to buy ice cream at one of the drug stores.

Besides my cherubic appeal, I had a number of things working in my favor. Daddy was the beloved Mr. Mayor. My mother, a beloved school teacher, had recently died. My stepmother was an unknown quantity, and conveyed a seriousness, perhaps, that raised questions of my future nurturing.

I, also, had working in my favor my doppelgänger, Opie Taylor, on the Andy Griffith Show. The jail was a closet with a barred door in the small Town Hall, where I could hang out with Annie, the town clerk.

With my father, I was a creature of downtown Cary. I passed from gas station, to barber shop, to jewelry store, to drug store, to the dime store – the Ken-Ben. It was a world of adults.

I developed my own habits. I was far too interested in the small cherry Pepsi and the Honey Bun. The Pepsi was in a paper cup, crushed ice, and a squirt of cherry syrup. Originally 5 cents, it was not long before the squirt was an extra penny, and not too much longer before it was a 7-cent cherry Pepsi. The large Pepsi was a dime, but at 10 cents, there was a penny tax. My knowledge of the sales tax table would ultimately serve me poorly, as I added tax to every answer on an arithmetic test; I received no credit.

The Honey Bun was wrapped in cellophane. The freshness could be measured by the sheen of the sugar glaze and a soft poke of center. I financed my habit, often, by inappropriate appropriation of the quarters set aside for my school lunch.

I was friends with the ladies at the Ken-Ben. Sometimes, Edna at the drugstore scared me a little. The jeweler with his loupe was intimidating, and the jewelry store was not really the best for boy visits.

The Ken-Ben closed, and I spent most of my time at the drug stores. In the 1960s, there was still an afternoon paper from Raleigh, *The Raleigh Times*. The papers were dropped off in bundles at the drug stores, and the corps of paper boys would wrap them in rubber bands and put them in baskets on their bikes. I did a few of the downtown deliveries for some of the boys in exchange for my Pepsi and Honey Bun money.

Inside the stores I would wander the aisles looking at the merchandise. One friend would occasionally show up and embarrass me chasing around the aisles with the perfume and aftershave samples. There were not a lot of toys at the drug stores, but there were plastic models of battleships and balsa wood airplanes. There were nickel and dime gliders and the Sleek Streak, a larger rubber band driven propeller plane. The Sleek Streak was 50 cents, then maybe 75 cents and a dollar.

People would come and go. There were always the two pharmacists, Mr. Ashworth and Mr. Mitchell. There were high school girls working the soda fountains, making bromo-seltzers or BC powders, and heating hotdogs and hamburgers. In the evenings there were not many people at the counter, and I could sit and talk with the high school girls. Sometimes, late in the evening my father and some of the older men, who had built the sewers and run the electrical wires in the 1940s, would sit in the booths that they called The Dog House Club. They talked and drank coffee.

One of the drug stores had a rotating rack of paperback books – Cary's bookstore. Ian Fleming's James Bond books would show up, and I would buy them for the sake of a complete collection more than because I liked James Bond. I was being competitive. The movie, *Thunderball*, was a big hit. I never saw it. I named my cat Domino.

One day a new boy showed up as an employee at the drug store. I thought him a boy even at the time, as he looked more of high school than college – especially, college graduate. I am not sure exactly what his job was. He was not part of the soda fountain service, and the drug store did not really have clerks.

The boy started watching me as I inhabited the store after school. He was not very good at it, and I became very conscious of being watched. I felt untrusted – like I should not be there.

The next day he watched more closely. He would come stand next to me. He asked if he could help me. I left.

The following day, after I left, he came out to see what I had stolen. Nothing. He told me I could not come back to the drug store.

I stood on the sidewalk and cried.

I don't remember if I told Daddy. I was embarrassed. I think it likely that I was asked to go buy something at the drug store, or Daddy asked me to go with him, and I told him that I was no longer allowed.

My father was not one to get pressed, express outrage, and demand. The next afternoon, however, he asked me to go to the drug store with him. The owner told me I was still welcome. He might have given me something from the store.

I still did not feel comfortable at the store. When I went in, it was like I had a badge, permission to be there, but the fear of being watched, being denied, took a long time to disappear. Perhaps, it was only talking to the high school girl at the soda fountain in the evening that belonging returned.

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This was the privilege I was handed. White privilege? I can hear many of my white friends saying they would have been offered no such privilege.

Undoubtedly, however, I had privilege that I owned because of nothing other than the factual circumstances of the position of my birth family. Not wealth, position. I owned privilege based on the role of education and the perceptions education imbued to my family. Implicit trustworthiness, good people.

This was possible in Cary for a white family. Fifty years later, I do not imagine such privilege having been possible or, even, conceivable for Cary's black families.

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I don't recall seeing, as a young child, a police car in Cary. The policemen were friends. Andy Griffith helped this along. It was not until I was an adult that I learned of the deep distrust of the police that is common for African-Americans to have.

At the start of the 1950s, when my father became mayor, Cary had a Chief of Police, Mr. Midgette, who was given that title in 1939. He drove his private car with equipment donated by the sheriff. Often, any other police were volunteers. In 1953, the town bought its first police car. A part-time officer was hired. I remember Daddy being Chief of Police when Midgette was on vacation.

As Cary grew in the 1960s under the town manager form of government my father had advocated, the police department grew. The new professional police department was not as closely connected to the community. New officers answered recruitment advertisements.

In the late 1960s, I was pulled over riding my bicycle. I rode my bike in the street, as was the rigor of law. I stopped at a red light on Chatham Street. When it changed to green, I started riding. A policeman pulled me in front of the A&P grocery store. He told me that I had to get off of my bike, go to the sidewalk, cross with the pedestrian light and get back on the bike. He said I was, simply, a "pedestrian on wheels."

I knew this was not correct. It made no sense. And, I was ready to take to the argument that any driver, bicycle, car, or tractor, was a pedestrian on wheels.

I continued on Chatham Street to the radio station, WPTF, where Daddy worked and, of course, told him about being pulled by the police. He was certain the policeman was concerned for my safety.

Daddy had not been mayor for years, but many still called him Mr. Mayor. He would sit at the drug store in his Dog House Club. He was a member of the Rotary Club and the Masonic Lodge. He told his stories to his friends. A few days after being pulled over by the policeman, a message came to me. The town manager was making sure the police department understood the North Carolina laws of bicycling. I was assured, I could ride my bike on the streets. I had done nothing wrong.

Nothing illegal was ever "fixed" for me. However, I lived in a town that was shaped in a way that provided me ease. I was in the company of those who formed success and commerce.

I often think that the most important built in privilege is the privilege of education. That is passed on, essentially, without effort at the dinner table. There is the privilege of financial stability – the privilege of living with the rule makers.

Parents help their children. They introduce them to their friends with jobs and influence. Privilege resides with the group that is in power. There is always privilege if you are of the rule makers. Those groups come from history, from place, and norms evolve to support the success of those with power. No doubt, I had privilege. That privilege was white, because the structure supported the construction of society by those who were white.