How It Feels To Be Colored Me

Carol Blundell, along with husband Greg, daughter Shelley, and son Rowan, are born and bred South Africans. They moved to the States, found a beautiful home in the area, and are privileged to be part of the Kent State Stark community. Even though she is a non-traditional student, she plans to utilize everything she is learning towards helping the elderly once she finishes with her studies.

This essay was for “College Writing I,” as taught by Dr. Jay Sloan. The assignment asked students to conceptualize their own perspective of race in response to class readings.

Growing up in a different country led me to believe that the racial situation I grew up in was different from anywhere else in the world. It took a lot of travel, reading and TV programs to make me realize just how universal this problem really is. As with South Africa, it's not just whites and blacks, it is many others that combine to form one huge salad bowl; everyone wants to be equal, but also wants to maintain their own individuality and heritage. Considering I lived through an important part of South African history, such as the freeing of Nelson Mandela and black people being allowed to vote for the first time, I felt a little more strongly and emotionally in sync with this subject.

When people see me, first and foremost I'm viewed as White/Caucasian. I'm also classed as a foreigner because of my accent. Once I am questioned about my nationality and I say South African, the usual follow-up is, “Yes, but what country?” After I establish that South Africa is a real country and not just a direction, the most common response is then, “But you’re white!”

In South Africa, I was both advantaged and disadvantaged. Being an English speaking white female meant that I had a choice of low paying jobs that black people were prohibited from applying for. It also meant that any white, Afrikaans speaking males would just walk into the good jobs, whether they were qualified for them or not. It was a sort of reverse affirmative action. On my first day working for a government department, I was told in no uncertain terms that because I am female, I would not be considered for promotion for at least ten years.

In her article, “White Privilege: unpacking the invisible knapsack,” Peggy McIntosh stated, “I think whites are carefully taught not to recognize white privilege, …” and “Whiteness protected me from many kinds of hostility, distress, and violence, which I was being subtly trained to visit in turn upon people of color.”

I first became aware of how different we were to the rest of the world during my primary school life, which in South Africa is between grades three and seven. At this time, South Africa had sanctions imposed against it as a result of the system of apartheid that was in place, and Nelson Mandela was in jail for committing treason against a ruling government. The Beatles were banned as a result of John Lennon saying that he was more popular than God and our highly religious Afrikaans-led government considered this worthy of permanently banning all of their music. Enid Blyton’s Noddy books were taken off the library shelves because they had a gollywog in the story, which the Afrikaans regime considered to be a symbol of a black person.

This feeling of being very different was further exacerbated when I left school and traveled throughout Europe. One particular instance that sticks in my mind would be a time in Vienna when a local person offered to show us the sights. I was excluded from this offer because I was from South Africa. I wasn’t asked what my
political affiliation was, I was just excluded. This gave me a miniscule insight as to how people of color must have felt their whole lives.

As minority South Africans, i.e. white and English speaking, I would say our socially perceived category would have been that of an ongoing tradition that was once enjoyed by the upper and middle class English families: habitual high teas, roast beef with Yorkshire pudding on Sundays, and so on. Now that we have transplanted ourselves to another continent, we consider ourselves to be Africans in America, but that is purely a geographical term.

According to the extensive research conducted by Spencer Wells, a recent visitor to our campus, and reported in his book, The Journey of Man, A Genetic Odyssey, (p. xiii) "Every piece of DNA in our bodies can be traced back to an African source." I recognize that the whole of mankind originated in Africa and developed from there, so apart from the quirks that separate us by appearance, traditions, and music, we are all basically cut from the same cloth. The actual validity of the socially perceived category is, as far as I'm concerned, a thing of the past. It served its purpose to a select few while in place, but change has now come about and it is up to each individual to find their own place in the new society.

The obliviousness of youth has led to feelings of guilt as an adult. While I realized we were "different" from a lot of people growing up, I never realized to what extent our enlightened government had disadvantaged the rest of the country. I once attended a talk where the speaker explained to us that the system that was in place was going to lead to a nation of psychopaths being let loose on society. At the time I put it down to typical alarmist propaganda. Unfortunately, those words now echo from just about every crime I read about in the South African newspapers. The system of apartheid is wrong on so many levels that it will take many generations to eradicate its consequences completely. It separated families, making virtual strangers among siblings and parents; it demoralized a whole nation into believing that they were less than worthy of being alive; and the worst thing of all was that most young adults of today have absolutely no regard for the value of human life. They will literally kill each other, or anyone else, for 20c.

Being white in a multi-cultural country definitely had advantages when I was growing up. Of course, being oblivious to the hardship of others, as is common in the selfishness of childhood, I went through life mixing only with white friends, attended a white school, lived where we wanted; and when time came for me to go job hunting, I was at the forefront of any line that included black, colored or Indian people. These were the more obvious advantages.

The subtle advantages of being white took some thinking about. The one thing that does come to mind is the fact that because of the color of my skin, whatever I said was taken at face value. We had a rather cruel stereo-typing as far as the Indian people were concerned. Because most Indian families ran businesses, they became very glib with their sales pitches. Following on from this was the expression, "You can see he's lying, his lips are moving." There was also a distrust of black people because of the sad fact that, not being allowed to mingle, we treated them with skepticism. I was brought up to believe that just about every black person practiced some form of witchcraft, and that they could use things like the hair from my brush to cast spells against me. Talk about paranoia.

Consciously exploiting my racial identification was more prevalent when I was small. One example I can think of is the fact that we had different buses. When integration eventually started, we had to sit at the front of the bus. If there was only one seat available on the bus and there was a white person and a person of color at the bus stop, the white person would get the seat. We got the choicer cuts of meat at the butcher shops, the freshest bread, and so on. We also had beaches where only white people were allowed to swim, while the black people had their own beach higher up.
When I was a child, one of my daily chores was to go to our local tearoom to buy bread and milk. Sometimes it would be quite dark by the time I went and the only form of protection I had was my pet chameleon. The black people were deathly afraid of these, because of the fact that they changed color. The witchdoctors believed them to be a "Tokolosh," or evil spirit. One example I can think of in which I exploited my race unconsciously was by taking for granted the fact that our office "tea boy," an elderly black gentleman by the name of Columbus, had such a menial position because of his lack of education. Not for one minute did I consider the travesty that had actually led to him only being qualified for such work. I don't know how someone could have raised a family on the meager salary he must have earned.

I would like to believe that over the years, having seen the hardships and struggles of the people of color in Africa, particularly South Africa, I have become a lot more compassionate and understanding about the hardships and deprivations suffered by a large number of people. When I was first married, I lived in a company house, and less than a mile away was the start of a black township. We had a huge fence separating us, and you could see the differences between our side of the fence and theirs. Fires were quite common because they had no electricity or gas to use for cooking and had to make use of little camp stoves. There was no running water, telephones, sanitation, etc. When I think about it now, it makes me incredibly sad as to how ignorant we were in those days.

I used to type court cases in South Africa and one case in particular stands out in my memory. A wealthy white businessman was contesting being fined for not having a dog license. His argument was that he was being discriminated against because he had a street address, and all the dogs that used to roam around the squatter settlements were ignored because it was impossible to trace the owners. It made me angry then, and even thinking about it now still makes me angry. If memory serves me correctly, I think the dog license cost around R10, ($1,50). The worst part was that he won.

Race has always been an important feature in my life but has gained importance to me as I've aged. It seems to me that people of color have been discriminated against on every continent, and even though change is taking place, I doubt if I will see any significant improvement in my lifetime. Future generations have a monumental task ahead of them before all people can finally be treated as equals.