

## Encountering Race and Racism

### Followed by a Police Officer, Riley Lockett, 16, Youth Radio, Oakland, Calif. Black.



About two months ago, I was walking to the BART station from school, sipping on soda and listening to a podcast when I noticed a blue uniform following me like a shadow. It was a white police officer. He scanned me as if he were the Terminator, trying to see if I posed a threat. I had never been stopped by a cop before. But I wasn't scared or even nervous. I was prepared.

My mother was always gearing me up for something: a good education, future job security and, most of all, institutionalized racism. Every time we passed a police car, she would drill my sister and me on what to do if and when a police officer stops us. We would begrudgingly repeat what our superior said: "Maintain eye contact, stand straight, speak when spoken to, no sudden movements."

As children, we never understood why she grilled us like that. Then, when I was 12, Trayvon Martin was killed. Even though it wasn't a cop who killed him, I started to comprehend what she was preparing us for. Although we live in a quiet suburb of Oakland, we are in a city where a police officer is usually seen as more of a threat than a friend. As a young black man, I know an officer of the law can shoot me no matter where I am — and maybe especially in the middle of Orinda, the mostly white city where I was being stopped for the first time.

So, as the cop was questioning me, I decided to practice what my mom preached.

"Is there a problem, officer?" I asked in my most articulate, mature, but nonviolent voice.

"No. What's your name?"

"Riley Lockett."

"How old are you?"

"Sixteen."

"Where do you go to school?"

"Orinda Academy, just up the hill. But I live in Oakland."

"Do you have ID?"

"Yes, here you go."

I felt like I was performing a one-man show I've been rehearsing my whole life. He eyed my ID, then looked through me while handing it back. He turned on his radio and mumbled some breaker-breaker nonsense into it, and in a few seconds he got a few squawks back.

"You're free to go," he said to me in a tone that made it sound like his mind was on something else.

I felt bold enough to ask, "What was the problem, officer?"

"Oh, some guy robbed a convenience store a couple streets over," he told me. "He fled in this direction, and you matched the description."

I've never had to face the color of my skin in anything but a mirror. So as far as police interactions go, I'd say my first one went pretty well. I know there will be plenty more as I get older.

Having to spend my childhood rehearsing for the day a police officer would pull me over may sound scary. And I'm aware it's not something parents of all races feel the need to teach their kids. But the day it actually happened, I was grateful, at least, that my mom made sure I was ready.

### Discuss

- Riley mentions that the police officer was white and the city where he was stopped was mostly white. Why is this information included?
- How was Riley prepared for his encounter with the police officer?
- Why does Riley say that in his community, a police officer is usually seen more of a threat than a friend?
- What impact do you think his needing to "prepare" has on him?
- How might this be an example of racism?
- If Riley came to you as his teacher to discuss this incident, how might you respond?



### **A Slur Directed at Me, Marianne Nacanaynay, 15, Youth Radio, Mountlake Terrace, WA. Filipina**

The first time someone directed a racial slur toward me I was at a pizza place in Everett, a town in western Washington State. One of my friends who works with me on our high school newspaper wanted to get lunch early, and the place was already crowded with a line stretching around the block. I was waiting outside of the restaurant and chatting on the phone when out of the corner of my eye, I saw two dudes walking by. They were young looking — teenagers or 20-somethings — with light skin and blond/brown hair. As they passed me, I heard them laugh and say, “(expletive) chink.”

It took me a few moments to process what I had just heard. I was taken aback, but not exactly surprised. After all, there I was, a Filipina reporter covering a Trump rally.

Washington State tends to be super liberal. We had the first elected married gay mayor of a major American city. We’ve legalized recreational marijuana. Until recently, Republicans I knew here were mostly “in the closet” in the sense they didn’t talk much about their opinions in public. But I’ve learned that doesn’t mean racism doesn’t exist in Washington — it’s just typically a less overt brand of racism.

Growing up, I lived in Auburn, a suburb south of Seattle, and there weren’t a lot of other kids who looked like me. Back then, it didn’t bother me, because I didn’t think too much about race. My family raised me with phrases like “People are people,” and “It’s who you are inside that counts.”

I remember the time I had a white classmate come over to my house for dinner. We served *adobo*, which is chicken or pork that’s been marinated in soy sauce or vinegar then fried, and *ube*, a dessert made of purple yam. The girl politely tried everything but mostly pushed the food around the plate. When I asked her about it later, she said the flavors weren’t familiar to her.

Then in sixth grade we moved to Mountlake Terrace, a suburb about 20 minutes north of Seattle with a noticeable Asian population. Being around more Asian friends, I found myself reflecting differently on my interactions with white peers.

I brought a plate of the same *adobo* to a party, and people loved it. Having people like my culture made me feel more comfortable with it, too.

So, after years of slowly opening myself up to having pride about my race and culture, hearing two boys call me a chink in the middle of a pizza place was a snap back to reality. On the one hand, it was so over-the-top, it was almost comical. I mean, it’s not even the right racial slur, since I’m not Chinese.

Sometimes I think back on that incident, like when I hear about other people being called a racial slur, or when I hear about people harassing others at Trump rallies. And I remember how I felt vulnerable. It’s a reminder that there are some places where I am still considered the “other.”

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### **Discuss**

- Why do you think Marianne wasn’t initially surprised when she heard the slur directed at her?
- What does Marianne mean when she says Washington has a “less overt” brand of racism?
- In what ways did Marianne think differently about her interactions with white peers after she moved to a town with more Asian-American people?
- If Marianne came to you as her teacher to discuss this incident, how might you respond?

## Encountering Race and Racism

### A Lesson From Kindergarten, Maya James, 19, Youth Radio, Traverse City, MI, Mixed Race (Black/White)



Shortly after enrolling in kindergarten, one of my classmates threw the N-word at me in a small scuffle. I cannot remember what the little boy was so upset about — it was probably something elementary school students usually get upset about. Maybe I was hogging the markers; maybe I cut in line, or vice versa.

It was the first time I had ever heard that word. I didn't know how to react. I had many questions. Should I be upset? Could I call the white student the N-word, too? Who invented this word? Do adults use the word?

Before that moment, I had no idea what race was or what class meant. Now I had to grow up.

My teachers tried to intervene — yanking the little boy's arm and demanding he look in my eyes and "see the pain she feels!" They forced him to stay in and write apology letters during recess in their words, not his. "I should have thought before saying black people are bad," says one note I've kept all these years, "To me, you are a good friend."

But the letters didn't stop the name-calling or the rock throwing at recess, at the bus stop or after school.

Back then I had a lot of loud temper tantrums. I was not a picnic for my parents. I cried a lot, I was irritable. That's when my father — who grew up in Longview, Tex., at the height of Jim Crow politics — started talking to me about race. After my teachers told him about the incident, he had no choice; he had to teach his 5-year-old daughter the tragic story of African genocide and white supremacy that was the American slave trade.

My dad's struggle and the struggle of his parents were now rubbing off on me at such a young age. No longer a little girl in the suburbs, but a descendant of people considered cattle. No reparations.

I remember thinking: This is unfair! What did I do to be born black?

Traverse City, Mich., is 94 percent white. So it's no wonder I felt alone growing up as a half-black, half-white little kid.

I am biracial, but in the United States, more often than not, I am always going to be labeled a person of color. I constantly have to choose between one side of my culture and the other — always seeking a greater identity. I feel like a puzzle piece that got lost, always trying to find some way to fit.

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#### Discuss

- Why do you think Maya's father started talking to her about race and racism when she was 5 years old?
  - Why does Maya feel she has to choose one race over the other in how she defines herself?
  - How do you think this affected Maya differently as a biracial person than it might someone who is one race or with a different racial identity?
  - What role did the teachers play in this racial encounter? What could they have done differently?
  - If Maya came to you as her teacher to discuss this incident, how might you respond?
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**What I Wish to Tell, Jose, 16, Youth Radio (*Jose is undocumented. He is using his first name only to protect his privacy. His essay has been translated from Spanish.*) Los Angeles, CA, Salvadoran.**



I remember the first day I learned what American racism means. My friend and I were walking home from school and we walked by a white couple. They looked at us and started talking to each other in hushed tones. We couldn't understand everything they said, but we caught some bad stuff about Latinos and immigration, and we knew they were talking about us. We just kept on walking. It's not worth getting into a back-and-forth. It's better to just be quiet.

They don't know the stuff that we had to go through back home.

I wish I could tell them about my life in El Salvador. Back there, things are really tough with gangs. There was a time when I was walking to the store and a couple of gang members stopped me and asked, "What do you bang?" I don't, I told them. "So what are you doing in this area?" they replied. It was clearly a threat.

I would tell them how hard it was to say goodbye to my friends and family. I wasn't going to go to same school anymore. I wasn't going to have the same friends. I wasn't going to live with the family I grew up with all my life. I asked God to help me, asked him to guide me, to bless me and keep me safe during this journey.

I would tell them about the day I left home, how I woke up at 3 a.m. nervous and sad. I didn't know what to expect. I envisioned the United States as this big city where things were so close and everything was accessible, like hospitals and businesses. When I finally got here, everything felt strange to me, from the language to the streets. Everything.

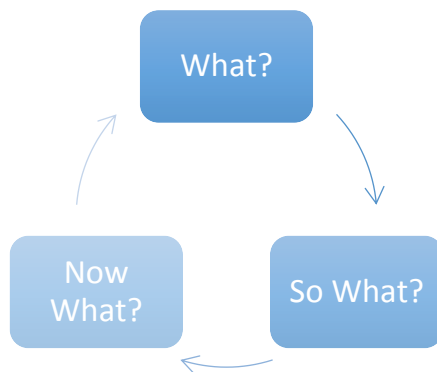
I would tell them about how hard I've worked for people to accept me. At school, I've tried to be friendly, but there have been times when people have said things to me because I speak Spanish. You know, racist people who say, "This is America. You should speak English." I don't care what people say. At the end of the day, they don't pay my bills.

Back in El Salvador, I didn't really know what racism was. I knew it had something to do with discriminating against someone. After being in the United States for a while, I learned the meaning and impact of that word. It's sad that people can be hurtful. They just don't understand. It's hard to be an immigrant kid. Our backgrounds haven't been easy, and we just want something better.

### Discuss

- How did Jose and his friend know the white couple was talking about them?
- What were some of the hardships Jose faced in his journey, and why did he wish the white couple knew that?
- Why do you think Jose said he didn't understand discrimination until he came to the United States?
- How does a statement like "This is America. You should speak English" play into institutional and individual racism?
- If Jose came to you as his teacher discuss this incident, how might you respond?

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### What?

Reflect on the facts shared throughout this activity, what happened, with whom, and the substance of group interaction.

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### So What?

Reflect on the meaning of experience for each participant, the feelings involved, lessons learned and why it was necessary

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### Now What?

Reflect on how you can see this activity's place in the big picture, how you can apply lessons learned/insights gained to new situations and how you can use what you've learned to set future goals and create an action plan

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### Notes

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*Followed by  
a Police  
Officer*

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*A Slur  
Directed at  
Me*

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*Lesson from  
Kindergarten*

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*What I Wish  
to Tell*

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**Whole  
Group  
Discussion**

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**Additional  
Notes and  
Questions**

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## Encountering Race and Racism

### Small Group Discussion Questions

#### *Group 1: Followed by a Police Officer*

- What happened to Riley and what was his response?
- What is your personal reaction to this story?
- How was Riley prepared for his encounter with the police officer?
- Why does Riley say that in his community, a police officer is usually seen more of a threat than a friend?
- What impact do you think his needing to “prepare” has on him?
- If Riley came to you as his teacher to discuss this incident, how might you respond?

#### *Group 2: A Slur Directed at Me*

- What happened to Marianne and what was her response?
- What is your personal reaction to this story?
- Why do you think Marianne wasn’t initially surprised when she heard the slur directed at her?
- What does Marianne mean when she says Washington has a “less overt” brand of racism?
- In what ways did Marianne think differently about her interactions with white peers after she moved to a town with more Asian-American people?
- If Marianne came to you as her teacher to discuss this incident, how might you respond?

#### *Group 3: Lesson from Kindergarten*

- What happened to Maya and what was her response?
- What is your personal reaction to this story?
- Why do you think Maya’s father started talking to her about race and racism when she was 5 years old?
- Why does Maya feel she has to choose one race over the other in how she defines herself?
- How do you think this affected Maya differently as a biracial person than it might someone who is one race or with a different racial identity?
- If Maya came to you as her teacher to discuss this incident, how might you respond?

#### *Group 4: What I Wish to Tell*

- What happened to Jose and what was his response?
- What is your personal reaction to this story?
- How did Jose and his friend know the white couple was talking about them?
- What were some of the hardships Jose faced in his journey, and why did he wish the white couple knew that?
- Why do you think Jose said he didn’t understand discrimination until he came to the United States?
- If Jose came to you as his teacher discuss this incident, how might you respond?

### Whole Group Discussion Guiding Questions

- After reading and hearing about the stories, what stands out for you?
- What were your thoughts and feelings while reading your story or hearing others talk about the stories they read?
- What is the difference between individual racism (individual acts of bias, meanness or exclusion) and institutional racism (policies and practices that are supported by power and authority and that benefit some and disadvantage others) in these stories?
- How did each person’s encounter with racism change them?
- How might your experiences with racism shape your interactions with your students?
- How might your students’ experiences with racism shape their interactions with you and their peers?