

The Skin I'm In: I've been interrogated by police more than 50 times—all because I'm black

BY DESMOND COLE | 04/21/2015

The summer I was nine, my teenage cousin Sana came from England to visit my family in Oshawa. He was tall, handsome and obnoxious, the kind of guy who could palm a basketball like Michael Jordan. I was his shadow during his visit, totally in awe of his confidence—he was always saying something clever to knock me off balance.

One day, we took Sana and his parents on a road trip to Niagara Falls. Just past St. Catharines, Sana tossed a dirty tissue out the window. Within seconds, we heard a siren: a cop had been driving behind us, and he immediately pulled us onto the shoulder. A hush came over the car as the stocky officer strode up to the window and asked my dad if he knew why we'd been stopped. "Yes," my father answered, his voice shaky, like a child in the principal's office. My dad isn't a big man, but he always cut



(Image: Markian Lozowchuk)

an imposing figure in our household. This was the first time I realized he could be afraid of something. "He's going to pick it up right now," he assured the officer nervously, as Sana exited the car to retrieve the garbage. The cop seemed casually uninterested, but everyone in the car thrummed with tension, as if they were bracing for something catastrophic. After Sana returned, the officer let us go. We drove off, overcome with silence until my father finally exploded. "You

realize everyone in this car is black, right?" he thundered at Sana. "Yes, Uncle," Sana whispered, his head down and shoulders slumped. That afternoon, my imposing father and cocky cousin had trembled in fear over a discarded Kleenex.

My parents immigrated to Canada from Freetown, Sierra Leone, in the mid-1970s. I was born in Red Deer, Alberta, and soon after, we moved to Oshawa, where my father was a mental health nurse and my mother a registered nurse who worked with the elderly. Throughout my childhood, my parents were constantly lecturing me about respecting authority, working hard and preserving our family's good name. They made it clear that although I was the same as my white peers, I would have to try harder and achieve more just to keep up. I tried to ignore what they said about my race, mostly because it seemed too cruel to be true.

In high school, I threw myself into extra-curricular activities—student council, choir, tennis, soccer, fundraising drives for local charities—and I graduated valedictorian of my class. Despite my misgivings about my parents' advice, I was proud to be living up to their expectations. In 2001, I earned admission to Queen's University. I was enticed by the isolated, scenic campus—it looked exactly like the universities I'd seen in movies, with stately buildings and waterfront views straight out of *Dead Poets Society*. When I told my older sister, who was studying sociology at Western, she furrowed her brow. "It's so *white*," she bristled. That didn't matter much to me: Oshawa was just as white as Kingston, and I was used to being the only black kid in the room. I wasn't going to let my race dictate my future.

At Queen's, I was one of about 80 black undergrads out of 16,000. In second year, when I moved into the student village, I started noticing cops following me in my car. At first, I thought I was being paranoid—I began taking different roads to confirm my suspicions. No matter which route I took, there was usually a police cruiser in my rear-view mirror. Once I felt confident I was being followed, I became convinced that if I went home, the police would know where I lived and begin following me there too. I'd drive around aimlessly, taking streets I didn't know.

I had my first face-to-face interaction with the Kingston police a few months into second year, when I was walking my friend Sara, a white woman, back to her house after a party. An officer stopped us, then turned his back to me and addressed Sara directly. "Miss, do you need assistance?" he asked her. Sara was stunned into silence. "No," she said twice—once to the officer, and once to reassure herself that everything was all right. As he walked away, we were both too shaken to discuss what had happened, but in the following days we recounted the incident many times over, as if grasping to remember if it had really occurred. The fact that my mere presence could cause an armed stranger to feel threatened on Sara's behalf shocked me at first, but shock quickly gave way to bitterness and anger.

As my encounters with police became more frequent, I began to see every uniformed officer as a threat. The cops stopped me anywhere they saw me, particularly at night. Once, as I was walking through the laneway behind my neighbourhood pizza parlour, two officers crept up on me in their cruiser. “Don’t move,” I whispered to myself, struggling to stay calm as they got out of their vehicle. When they asked me for identification, I told them it was in my pocket before daring to reach for my wallet. If they thought I had a weapon, I was convinced that I’d end up being beaten, or worse. I stood in the glare of the headlights, trying to imagine how I might call out for help if they attacked me. They left me standing for about 10 minutes before one of them—a white man who didn’t look much older than me—approached to return my identification. I summoned the courage to ask why he was doing this. “There’s been some suspicious activity in the area,” he said, shrugging his shoulders. Then he said I could go. Another time, an officer stopped me as I was walking home from a movie. When I told him I wasn’t carrying ID, he twisted his face in disbelief. “What do you mean?” he asked. “Sir, it’s important that you always carry identification,” he said, as if he was imparting friendly advice. Everywhere I went, he was saying, I should be prepared to prove I wasn’t a criminal, even though I later learned I was under no legal obligation to carry ID. When I told my white friends about these encounters with police, they’d often respond with skepticism and dismissal, or with a barrage of questions that made me doubt my own sanity. “But what were you doing?” they’d badger, as if I’d withheld some key part of the story that would justify the cops’ behaviour.

When I was 22, I decided to move to Toronto. We’d visited often when I was a kid, driving into the city for festivals and fish markets and dinners with other families from Sierra Leone. In Toronto, I thought I could escape bigotry and profiling, and just blend into the crowd. By then, I had been stopped, questioned and followed by the police so many times I began to expect it. In Toronto, I saw diversity in the streets, in shops, on public transit. The idea that I might be singled out because of my race seemed ludicrous. My illusions were shattered immediately.

My skin is the deep brown of a well-worn penny. My eyes are the same shade as my complexion, but they light up amber in the sun, like a glass of whiskey. On a good day, I like the way I look. At other times, particularly when people point out how dark I am, I want to slip through a crack in the ground and disappear. White people often go out of their way to say they don’t see colour when they look at me—in those moments, I’m tempted to recommend an optometrist. I know they’re just expressing a desire for equality, but I don’t want to be erased in the process. When I walk down the street, I find myself imagining that strangers view me with suspicion and fear. This phenomenon is what the African-American writer and activist W. E. B. Du Bois described as “double-consciousness”: how blacks experience reality through their own eyes and through the eyes of a society that prejudices them.

I hate it when people ask me where I'm from, because my answer is often followed by, "But where are you *really* from?" When they ask that question, it's as though they're implying I don't belong here. The black diaspora has rippled across Toronto: Somalis congregate in Rexdale, Jamaicans in Keele, North Africans in Parkdale. We make up 8.5 per cent of the city's population, but the very notion of a black Torontonians conflates hundreds of different languages, histories, traditions and stories. It could mean dark-skinned people who were born here or elsewhere, who might speak Arabic or Patois or Portuguese, whose ancestors may have come from anywhere in the world. In the National Household Survey, the term "black" is the only classification that identifies a skin colour rather than a nation or region.



(Image: Markian Lozowchuk)

There's this idea that Toronto is becoming a post-racial city, a multicultural utopia where the colour of your skin has no bearing on your prospects. That kind of thinking is ridiculously naïve in a city and country where racism contributes to a self-perpetuating cycle of criminalization and imprisonment. Areas where black people live are heavily policed in the name of crime prevention, which opens up everyone in that neighbourhood to disproportionate scrutiny. We account for 9.3 per cent of Canadian prisoners, even though we only make up 2.9 per cent of the populace at large. And anecdotal evidence suggests that more and more people under arrest are pleading guilty to avoid pretrial detention—which means they're more likely to end up with a criminal record. Black people are also more frequently placed in maximum-security institutions, even if the justice system rates us as unlikely to be violent or to reoffend: between 2009 and 2013, 15 per cent of black male inmates were assigned to maximum-security, compared to 10 per cent overall. If we're always presumed guilty, and if we receive harsher punishments for the same crimes, then it's no surprise that many of us end up in poverty, dropping out of school and

reoffending.

About a decade ago, the Toronto Police Service established carding, a controversial practice that disproportionately targets young black men and documents our activities across the city. According to police parlance, it's a voluntary interaction with people who are not suspected of a crime. Cops stop us on the street, demand identification, and catalogue our race, height, weight and eye colour. Until early this year, these fill-in-the-blanks forms—known as Field Information Reports—also had slots to identify a civilian as a “gang member” or “associate”; to record a person's body markings, facial hair and cellphone number; and, for minors, to indicate whether their parents were divorced or separated. All that information lives in a top-secret database, ostensibly in the interest of public safety, but the police have never provided any evidence to show how carding reduces or solves crime. They've also failed to justify carding's excessive focus on black men. The *Toronto Star* crunched the numbers and found that in 2013, 25 per cent of people carded were black. At that time, I was 17 times more likely than a white person to be carded in Toronto's downtown core.

In late March, the TPS revamped their carding policy, announcing with much self-congratulatory back-slapping that they'd rebranded the FIR cards as “community engagement reports,” implemented a plan for racial sensitivity training and eliminated carding quotas for officers. But when you look at the fine print, it's clear that little has changed. Under their new procedures, police do not have to inform civilians that a carding interaction is voluntary, that they can walk away at any time. Cops won't be required to tell civilians why they are being stopped, and their internal justifications for a stop are so broad they might as well not exist. Worst of all, the database where police have been storing this information will still be used.

In a recent report to the Toronto Police Services Board, residents in 31 Division, which includes several low-income and racialized neighbourhoods in northwest Toronto, were candid about their views of police. Many said our cops disrespect them, stop them without cause and promote a climate of constant surveillance in their neighbourhoods. Some respondents to the TPSB survey said they now avoid certain areas within their own neighbourhoods for fear of encountering police. Black respondents were most likely to report that police treated them disrespectfully, intimidated them or said they fit the description of a criminal suspect. “Police are supposed to serve and protect, but it always feels like a battle between us and them,” one survey participant said.

I have been stopped, if not always carded, at least 50 times by the police in Toronto, Kingston and across southern Ontario. By now, I expect it could happen in any neighbourhood, day or night, whether I am alone or with friends. These interactions don't scare me anymore. They make me angry. Because of that unwanted scrutiny, that discriminatory surveillance, I'm a

prisoner in my own city.

When I arrived in Toronto in 2004, I had no idea what I wanted to do other than escape my suburban hometown and the bigotry I'd faced in Kingston. For the first few months, I crashed with my childhood friend Matthew at his grandfather's East York home. I didn't have much money, so I spent a lot of time wandering downtown, sitting in parks or coffee shops, marvelling at the diversity I saw on the streets. I was enjoying an anonymity I had never experienced before. One night I set out, journal in hand, to find somewhere to write. Less than a minute into my stroll, a police cruiser stopped me on Holborne Avenue, near Woodbine and Cosburn.

"How are you doing this evening?" one of the two officers asked from the car. By now I was familiar with this routine. I'd been stopped a dozen times in Kingston and followed so frequently I'd lost count. "I'm okay," I replied, trying to stay calm. "What are you doing?" the officer continued. "Walking," I said with a glare. When he asked me if I lived around there, I replied that I didn't have to disclose that information. My mouth was dry and my heart was racing—I didn't usually refuse police requests during confrontations, but my frustration had got the better of me. "Could you tell me what street we're on right now?" the cop asked. I was quaking with rage at this unsolicited game of 20 questions. "Anyone can tell you that," I shot back, trying not to raise my voice. "There's a street sign right in front of you."

My parents would have been furious—they'd always taught me to politely answer any questions I was asked. The police had the upper hand. But I'd lost patience. I demanded to know why I was being stopped. "We've had some break-and-enters in this area recently," the officer replied, as if that explained everything. "Well, unless you think I'm the culprit, I have the right to walk in peace." The officer seemed taken aback. He quickly wished me good night, and they drove off. I was so shaken I could have sat down and cried, but I realized the street I was living on was no longer a safe place to stand at night. I walked briskly to the Danforth, where I escaped into a bar.

After bouncing all over the city trying to find work, I eventually got a job at a drop-in centre for homeless youth at Queen and Spadina. As I settled into my life in Toronto, unwanted attention followed me everywhere I went. That year was 2005, the Summer of the Gun, when a streak of Toronto murders made headlines around the country. Most of the shooting victims and suspects were young black men, many of them alleged gang members, and the surge of violence stoked a culture of racial anxiety. I read about these shootings with sadness, but also with fear that people were reflexively associating me with gun crimes. If someone ignored me when I asked for directions on the street, or left the seat next to me vacant on the streetcar, I wondered if they were afraid of me.

In Kingston, I was used to women crossing the street when they saw me approaching, but until I

moved to Toronto, I'd never seen them run. One night, I stepped off a bus on Dufferin Street at the same time as a young woman in her 20s. She took a couple of steps, looked over her shoulder at me, and tore into a full sprint. I resisted the urge to call out in my own defence. In 2006, I ran for Toronto city council in Trinity-Spadina. As I canvassed houses along Bathurst Street, a teenage girl opened the door, took one look at me, and bolted down the hallway. She didn't even close the door. When her mother appeared a moment later and apologized, I couldn't tell which of us was more embarrassed.

That same year, I was denied entry to a popular bar on College Street. The bouncer told me I couldn't come in with the shoes I had on, a pair of sneakers that resembled those of countless other guys in the queue. Fuming, I began to object, but I quickly realized that a black guy causing a scene at a nightclub was unlikely to attract much sympathy. I didn't want to embarrass the half-dozen friends I'd come with. We left quietly, and I've never gone back.

Shortly after my (unsuccessful) election campaign, I went to a downtown pub to watch hockey with some friends and my girlfriend at the time, a white child-care worker named Heather. The Leafs won, and the place turned into a party. Heather and I were dancing, drinking and having a great time. On my way back from the washroom, two bouncers stopped me and said I had to leave. "We just can't have that kind of stuff around here," one of them informed me. I asked what "stuff" he meant, but he and his partner insisted I had to go. They followed closely behind me as I went back upstairs to inform Heather and my friends that I was being kicked out. My friends seemed confused and surprised, but none made a fuss or questioned the bouncers who stood behind me. People stopped dancing to see what was going on and, recognizing that security was involved, kept their distance. I tried not to make eye contact with anyone as the guards escorted me out of the bar.

I have come to accept that some people will respond to me with fear or suspicion—no matter how irrational it may seem. After years of needless police scrutiny, I've developed habits to check my own behaviour. I no longer walk through upscale clothing stores like Holt Renfrew or Harry Rosen, because I'm usually tailed by over-attentive employees. If I'm paying cash at a restaurant, I will hand it to the server instead of leaving it on the table, to make sure no one accuses me of skipping out on the bill. If the cops approach, I immediately ask if I am being detained. Anyone who has ever travelled with me knows I experience serious anxiety when dealing with border officials—I'm terrified of anyone with a badge and a gun, since they always seem excessively interested in who I am and what I'm doing. My eyes follow every police car that passes me. It has become a matter of survival in a city where, despite all the talk of harmonious multi-culturalism, I continue to stand out.

FIELD INFORMATION CARD		ZONE	TP3	TPS208
CONTACT DETAILS		200B05		
DATE (YYYY/MM/DD)	TIME (24 HOUR CLOCK)			
AT <input type="checkbox"/>	NEAR <input type="checkbox"/>	LOCATION/INTERSECTION		
LOCATION DETAILS		OFFICER NO. (S)		
PROJECT #		REFERENCE TYPE/REF NO.	NATURE OF CONTACT	
CIRCUMSTANCE OF INVESTIGATION				
PERSON INVESTIGATED				
SURNAME				
G1				
G2				
ALIAS/NICKNAME				
DOB (YYYY/MM/DD)	AGE	SEX	BIRTHPLACE	COLOUR
APPEARANCE		EYES	HAIR (STYLE/LENGTH/COLOUR)	FACIAL HAIR
HEIGHT	WEIGHT	IDENTIFIED BY (ID TYPE)	ID CONFIRMED	
ADDRESS		SAME AS LOCATION <input type="checkbox"/>	NFA <input type="checkbox"/>	PROV/COUNTRY
TELEPHONE NO <input type="checkbox"/>	CELL NO. <input type="checkbox"/>	EMAIL <input type="checkbox"/>		
DRIVERS LICENCE NO.		PROV/STATE	DRIVER <input type="checkbox"/>	
			PASS. <input type="checkbox"/>	
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ASSOCIATES YES <input type="checkbox"/> NO <input type="checkbox"/>				THIS SUBJECT IS PART OF A GROUP			
ENTER A SEPARATE TPS 208 FOR EACH ASSOCIATE AND ATTACH							
PRIMARY SURNAME				ASSOC # <input type="checkbox"/>			
TO LINK ASSOC'S				OF <input type="checkbox"/>			
GANG/CLUB AND DESCRIPTION				GANG MEMBER <input type="checkbox"/>			
				ASSOCIATE <input type="checkbox"/>			
CLOTHING AND BODY MARKINGS							
PERSON COMMENTS							
YOUNG PERSON INFORMATION							
ATTENDING [SCHOOL ETC]		GRADE		PARENTS ARE		DIVORCED <input type="checkbox"/>	
						SEPARATED <input type="checkbox"/>	
FATHER (SURNAME, G1)				CAREGIVER ADVISED			
				YES <input type="checkbox"/>			
				NO <input type="checkbox"/>			
MOTHER (SURNAME, G1)				YOUTH BUREAU NOTIFIED			
				YES <input type="checkbox"/>			
				NO <input type="checkbox"/>			
VEHICLE INFORMATION							
LICENCE PLATE		PROV/STATE		PLATE LOGO		LOGO DESIGN	
				YES <input type="checkbox"/>		NO <input type="checkbox"/>	
YEAR (YYYY)	MAKE	MODEL	COLOUR	STYLE			
VIN #							
VEHICLE DAMAGE							
DAMAGE LOCATION				DAMAGE DESCRIPTION			
DAMAGE / COMMENT		EMAIL TO		FIR ENTERED BY			
RWN POLICE ACCOUNTABILITY REPRODUCTION JUNE 25/2011 fax: 416-365-9371							

A Toronto police contact card from July 2011. Cops use these forms to document the activities of civilians, particularly black men. They stop people on the street, catalogue their personal information and record it in a vast police database

I was carded for the first time in 2007. I was walking my bike on the sidewalk on Bathurst Street just south of Queen. I was only steps from my apartment when a police officer exited his car and approached me. "It's illegal to ride your bike on the sidewalk," he informed me. "I know, officer, that's why I'm walking it," I replied edgily. Then the cop asked me for ID. After sitting in front of the computer inside his car for a few minutes, the officer returned nonchalantly and said, "Okay, you're all set." I wanted to tell him off, but thought better of it and went home. I still don't know what he saw when he ran my name.

Over the next seven years, I was carded at least a dozen times. One summer evening in 2008, two friends and I were stopped while walking at night in a laneway just north of my apartment, only a few hundred metres from where I was carded the first time. Two officers approached in their cruiser, briefly turning on their siren to get our attention. Once they got out of the car, they asked us what we were doing. "We're just walking, bro," I said. The cops immediately asked all of us to produce identification. While one officer took our drivers' licences back to his car, the other got on his radio. I heard him say the word "supervisor," and my stomach turned. Within 60 seconds, a second cruiser, marked S2, arrived in the laneway, and the senior officer at the wheel got out to join his colleagues.

The officer who had radioed for backup returned and asked us to empty our pockets. As the supervisor watched, the radio officer approached us one at a time, took our change and wallets and inspected them. He was extremely calm, as if he was thoroughly accustomed to this routine. “I’m going to search each of you now to make sure you didn’t miss anything,” he explained. I knew it was my legal right to refuse, but I couldn’t muster the courage to object. The search officer approached me first. “Before I search you, I want you to tell me if I’m going to find anything you shouldn’t have,” he said gravely. “I don’t have anything,” I replied, my legs trembling so violently I thought they’d give out from under me. The officer patted down my pockets, my pant legs, my jacket, my underarms. He then repeated the search with my two friends, asking each of them before touching them if he would find anything. One of my friends spoke up: “I have a weed pipe in my back pocket, but there’s nothing in it.” The officer took the pipe and walked with the supervisor to the car with the officer who had taken our ID. As the policemen huddled for what felt like an hour, my friend apologized. “It’s not your fault,” I replied. I cursed myself for choosing that route rather than staying on Queen Street, where hundreds of people would have been walking. Here, we had no witnesses.

When the officers finally came back, they returned the pipe to my friend. “Are any of you currently wanted on an out-standing warrant?” asked the search officer. We all said no. “Okay, guys, have a good night,” he said. I was still too scared to move, and apparently my friends were too; we just stood there and looked at the cops for a second. “You can go,” the officer assured us. I made sure not to look back for fear they’d interpret some outstanding guilt on my part. I was certain that the police had just documented my name along with the names of my friends, one of whom was carrying a pipe for smoking an illegal substance. This information would be permanently on my record.

Another time, as I smoked a cigarette outside a local community centre on Bloor West near Dufferin, a police officer sat parked in his car, glaring at me and scribbling notes. After five minutes of this, I walked over to his cruiser. “Is there a problem, officer?” I asked. The cop, a 30-something white guy, asked, “Oh, are you lost? You look like you’re lost.” His response was so ridiculous I almost laughed in exasperation, but instead I just repeated that I was fine. After a brief pause the officer rejoined, “Really? ’Cause you seemed lost.” I had to remind myself that I wasn’t going crazy. “I know why you’re doing this,” I told him before dashing my cigarette and going back inside. Whether it was motivated by ignorance, training, police culture or something else, the officer’s behaviour sent a clear message: I didn’t belong.

When I was a boy in Oshawa, my parents always greeted black strangers we passed on the street. As an adult, I have taken up this ritual in Toronto—it’s an acknowledgement of a shared (if unwanted) experience. These days, when I meet other black people who want to talk about race, I feel comfort and reassurance. I was shopping at my local grocery store recently when an

elderly white fellow tapped me on the arm and pointed to a black clerk shelving goods down the aisle. “You guys, you brothers,” he said in broken English. It was one of those moments I was grateful for dark skin, to hide my embarrassment. “What do you mean?” I asked him. “You know, you and him, you guys brothers,” the man repeated. “But aren’t we brothers too, you and I?” I asked. He paused and smiled. “Oh, yes, yes!” As he left, the clerk and I exchanged a smile. It’s nice to be around other people who know what you’re going through.

After years of being stopped by police, I’ve started to internalize their scrutiny. I’ve doubted myself, wondered if I’ve actually done something to provoke them. Once you’re accused enough times, you begin to assume your own guilt, to stand in for your oppressor. It’s exhausting to have to justify your freedoms in a supposedly free society. I don’t talk about race for attention or personal gain. I would much rather write about sports or theatre or music than carding and incarceration. But I talk about race to survive. If I diminish the role my skin colour plays in my life, and in the lives of all racialized people, I can’t change anything.

Last winter, I asked the cops if I could look at my file. I was furious when they told me no: that the only way I could see that information was to file a Freedom of Information request. Each one can take months to process. One of my friends, a law student at Osgoode Hall, recently had his FOI request approved. When he finally saw his file, he learned that over the years cops had labelled him as “Jamaican,” “Brown East African” and “Black North African.” They said he was “unfriendly” with them, and that he believed he was being racially profiled.

I have no idea what I’ll find in my file. Does it classify me as Black West African or Brown Caribbean? Are there notes about my attitude? Do any of the cops give a reason as to why they stopped me? All I can say for certain is that over the years, I’ve become known to police. That shorthand has always troubled me—too many black men are “known” through a foggy lens of suspicion we’ve done nothing to earn. Maybe if they really got to know us, they’d treat us differently.
