

5-1-2015

Young, Black, and Gifted

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Recommended Citation

Son, Kevin (2015) "Young, Black, and Gifted," *Gandy Dancer Archives*: Vol. 3 : Iss. 2 , Article 3.
Available at: <https://knightscholar.geneseo.edu/gandy-dancer/vol3/iss2/3>

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Young, Black, and Gifted

*Foetid Phrases of Prejudice
Rend the air
Like flying splinters of glass
Shredding attempts at Resolution.
Lies propelled by Bigotry
Self-serving challenges to Witnesses
Disable discourse,
Twist the Truth,
Leaving any Opportunity for Healing
Lying Bloodied in the grimy Street
For Hours,
A corpse cut down by Fear.
"America" by Ed DeMattia*

Amadou Diallo, 23

Bronx, New York, February 4, 1999

"Mom, I'm going to college."

Forty-one shots. Unarmed aspiring college student was mistaken for someone else by four plainclothes officers. The last thing he told his mother was that

he had saved \$9,000 for college expenses. His shooters: Sean Carroll, Richard Murphy, Edward McMellon, and Kenneth Boss were all acquitted at trial.

We see it every day. We hear about it every day. Some try not to talk about it, others can't seem to stop. So many activists around but so little progress to speak of. We have definitely come far as a generation but it always seems like we're taking steps backwards. We live it every day—not all of us, of course, but a large majority. A lot of us, like myself, grow up believing that the world is fair and equal and that everyone treats each other with respect. Then somewhere along the ever-growing lines of maturity, that innocent yet oblivious state of mind is taken full advantage of and it hits like a bullet, piercing our entire perception of reality and understanding of the way the world works. Many of us simply close our eyes to the truth and try to pretend it isn't there, that it doesn't exist anymore. Almost as if it ended an era ago and there is no more reason to feel inferior or to feel consistently judged simply for being the person who you were born to be.

Sean Bell, 23

Queens, New York, November 25, 2006

"I love you too!"

Fifty shots. Unarmed groom-to-be was leaving his bachelor party when police fired fifty rounds at him. His friend, Joseph Guzman, told him that he loved him as they attempted to escape the onslaught. His shooters: Gescard Isnora and two others were cleared of criminal charges but Isnora was fired six years later and refused pension.

To be perfectly clear, I'm fully aware that there is definitely more than one form of bigotry. Preconceptions about homosexuality, feminism, gender, and foreigners all still exist today and are all rather prevalent topics of discussion. Hate comes in many forms and it all hurts. Not all prejudices have to be negative, but nine times out of ten they most certainly are. People will always have their fixed mindsets and see things in a certain frame, because of the way they were brought up, or what they view in the media, or what they figured out for themselves. Either way, it's definitely apparent that we're living in a man's world, but at the end of the day, it's a white man's planet.

Oscar Grant, 22

Oakland, California, January 1, 2009

“You shot me. You shot me!”

One shot to the back during arrest. Video footage revealed an unarmed Grant being held down by two officers. He was being further detained for “resisting arrest” via Taser. The officer claimed that he meant to reach for his Taser but “accidentally” pulled out his gun. Grant’s shooter, Johannes Mehserle, faced a murder trial and was convicted of involuntary manslaughter. His handwritten apology didn’t help his case much.

There comes a stage in every adolescent’s life where he will receive the infamous talk from his parents. This typically revolves around the birds and the bees and understanding that the changes occurring to your body are all natural and simply mean that you are growing up. On the other side of things, the talk that black parents give to their children—specifically the talk that they give to their sons—goes a little bit differently.

Trayvon Martin, 17

Sanford, Florida, February 26, 2012

“What are you following me for?”

One shot in the chest. Unarmed high school student killed by neighborhood watch captain while walking to his father’s house. Armed with hoodie, Skittles, and AriZona watermelon fruit juice cocktail. Deemed highly dangerous. His shooter, George Zimmerman, called in to report a “suspicious character,” then ignored instructions to remain in his vehicle, and confronted Trayvon of his own volition. He was charged and tried but acquitted a year later.

Don’t answer any questions. Don’t make any sudden movements. Don’t reach for your pockets. Always keep your pants up to your waist, so they don’t pick you out as easily. Try to always look clean cut and get your hair cut often (the only advice I refused to follow), so that you don’t look like a thug. No dreads or cornrows. Never talk back or act smart. Always, always, always make sure to ask, “Am I free to go?” Cops are not your friends; they will look for any excuse to take you down. Please remember that and always be aware of the kind of neighborhood you are in. You won’t get treated the same as the white kid. You have to fly to get to something that they can crawl to. Know where you stand in this world, but don’t let it stop you from doing great things.

“Why did you shoot me?”

Release of official police report was blocked by judge. Unarmed teenager fatally shot by police who answered a 911 call about an armed robbery. The caller said that McDade was armed in the hopes of receiving a quicker response; he wasn't. His shooters: were cleared of any criminal wrongdoing.

“Yo, can I interview you really quick?”

“Sure bro, I wouldn't mind.”

My friend Lucki was rather open to talking about his experience with the police. He lives in Brooklyn, same as I do.

“You sure? This is gonna be in a paper I'm writing, if you're okay with that?”

“If I let some random girl from *The Oswegonian* interview me the other day, for sure I would let the nigga I met my first day in college interview me.”

“Thanks, man. It's not really an interview; just a question I want to ask.”

“Shoot.”

“Have you ever been stopped by the cops?”

“Have I ever been stopped by the cops?” The repeated question came in a slightly shocked tone. “Just once over the summer, actually.”

“What happened?”

“I was on my way home from working at this summer camp for kids. Me and my boy were on our way to our friend's crib. Then outta nowhere this legit all-black cruiser pulls up next to us and the cop is like, ‘Stop right there!’ and he tells us he's about to search us for guns and shit 'cause there's been a lot of shootings in the area.”

“Wait, where you from again?” I interjected.

“Crown Heights.”

“Oh, yeah.”

“So, yeah, my boy with his dumb ass was about to go off on him, but I was like, ‘Yo, none of us have any weapons,’ but the guy wouldn't listen. Now someone like me knows my rights—I go to rallies and stuff like that so I know what's up. I will not answer any questions unless I have a lawyer present. That's just how I was brought up.”

“So, what'd he do?”

“I just told him I was a college student and I wasn't about that life.”

“And he just left y'all alone?”

“Surprisingly, yeah. I mean, I understand that certain measures are necessary but removing the source of the power is the only way for anything to change.”

Darius Simmons, 13

Milwaukee, Wisconsin, May 2012

“...”

One fatal shot to the chest at close range. After accusing Simmons of breaking into his house and stealing four shotguns, a seventy-six-year-old man shot and killed the boy in front of his mother. Simmons was in school at the time of the robbery. His shooter: John Henry Spooner has been sentenced to life in prison with no chance of parole. He was not an officer of the law.

The summer of 2010 was rather memorable for many reasons. I was a long way from home, visiting my grandparents in Houston. I hadn't been there since I was three years old, and my father thought that it would be a good way to get rid of me for the summer. At the time I was a young optimistic fourteen-year-old, just discovering his place in the world. From Houston, I had to take a bus by myself to Louisiana where I was to stay with my uncle who I also hadn't seen for years. It was a rather chilling experience, since I was pretty far out of my comfort zone. It also didn't help much that I was making this venture on my own.

Kimani Gray, 16

Brooklyn, New York, March 9, 2013

“Please don't let me die.”

Several shots fired. Allegedly armed sixteen-year-old faces off with NYPD officers and is fatally shot. Upon breaking off from a group of friends, Gray was confronted by the two officers who witnessed him fidgeting with his waistline and claimed that he pulled a gun on them but didn't shoot. They responded by filling him with holes, though eyewitnesses claim that Gray was running for his life. His shooters were excused of all charges and the case was never brought before a grand jury.

For whatever reason, the bus had come to a complete stop in what looked like a small parking lot devoid of white or yellow lines. I paid no attention to the exchange that occurred in the front of the bus as I had my headphones on and was blasting Eminem. I did, however, notice the passengers in the right

row across from mine give all their attention to the flashing lights outside their window and to whomever was speaking up front. Not even a minute later, a German shepherd led what looked like a police officer throughout the entirety of the coach bus from the front to the back and then back to the front again, all the while sniffing profusely. On his return trip though, he decided to hang around my row for a minute. His alert eyes locked onto mine for a brief moment and I felt an alarming sensation rush through my body as the dog simply stood there.

Jonathan Ferrell, 24 Charlotte, North Carolina, September 14, 2013

“...”

Ten shots. Unarmed college football player was shot by a police officer while seeking help following a car crash. Ferrell didn't have time to explain. The wreck was so bad that he had to climb out of the back window and stumble to the nearest house for help. Upon seeing Ferrell and hearing the banging and pleads for help, the homeowner proceeded to notify the police of a home invasion. His shooter: Randall Kerrick was arrested and charged with voluntary manslaughter.

The dog crept closer and sniffed my feet and the empty seat beside me somewhat nonchalantly for what seemed like an eternity. He didn't growl. He didn't show his teeth. He didn't bark. There wasn't really any general fear on my part, but I had to slightly hold myself back from petting his deep black and brown coat. Soon after he lost interest, his uniformed handler led him back down the aisle and out of the bus. Moments later, an officer drenched in forest green marched down to my row and barked at me, advising that I quietly step off the bus. Now completely frightened, I grabbed my bag and scurried down the aisle, my predator in tow and the accusing, yet intrigued eyes of my fellow passengers watching my every step.

I exited the bus to see two Border Patrol vehicles with their lights ablaze. Scattered among them were about five patrol officers, the German shepherd, and the bus driver having what seemed like a very distressing conversation with one of the officers. Another officer, who looked like some kind of deputy, proceeded to manhandle my luggage onto the ground as if it was being detained. My predator had finally emerged from the bus and guided me to its side. The onlookers continued to peer through the windows but their focus shifted to me all at once. I could feel the holes being bored through me. After

looking me up and down from nappy head to worn-out Jordans, he began to speak. He was the spitting image of Hank Schrader from *Breaking Bad*—short, stout, and bald with limousine tinted sunglasses and a deep burly voice that made him seem all the more intimidating. He spoke with the kind of authority that led me to assume that he was the chief.

John Crawford, 22

Beavercreek, Ohio, August 5, 2014

“It’s not real.”

Two shots. He was on the phone with his mother when he was shot by police in an Ohio Walmart. Police said he didn’t follow commands to put down a toy rifle he’d picked up in the store. A Walmart employee saw Crawford walking around with the air pump gun (a product sold by the store), got alarmed and proceeded to call 911. The state of Ohio has an open carry gun law. His shooters: Officer Williams and Sergeant Darkow were placed on administrative leave.

“Spread ya arms and legs.”

I obeyed and let him pat me down. This may have been the first time someone besides me grabbed my genitals with so much purpose. Pretending as if he had not just touched a prepubescent boy’s penis, the officer casually carried on with his questioning.

“Where ya headed?”

“My uncle’s house. My sister lives with him and my aunt.” This was before I’d received “the talk,” so I gave him any and all information pertaining to where I was going, where I had come from, and even where I was born.

“Oh really?”

“Yea.”

“Yea, I bet,” the deputy said, as he ruffled through my backpack, spilling all its contents onto the scorching July gravel.

At least I knew to stay silent then.

“Where ya from?” the chief continued.

“Houston.”

“Psh, get outta here!” he blurted, not in an authoritative accusatory way, but more like a good friend would if you told them you’d kissed the prettiest girl in school.

“It’s true, though.”

“Well, prove it, boy. Let’s see some I.D.”

In response I pulled out my wallet from my back pocket, took out my I.D. and handed it to him.

“Well, ain’t that a bitch!” he cheerfully yelled.

“Told ya.” At this point, I think he realized just how old I was from my I.D. because he kept glancing back and forth between me and the card like he was in slight disbelief.

“Sorry for the confusion. The dog told us there was weed on the bus. Must’a made a mistake,” he confessed rather gleefully.

Ignoring the fact that he just told me that his German shepherd had the ability to speak the English language, I simply chuckled and told him not to worry about it.

“Pick up ya stuff, and head on back on the bus.”

I didn’t think anything of this encounter at the time or later when I got to my uncle’s house. I didn’t even tell him what had happened. I kept telling myself that they were simply doing their job, and I brushed the whole experience back to the recesses of my mind. The fact that I had never touched marijuana a day in my life before that was probably just a simple misunderstanding. The fact that they didn’t even find any weed on the bus at all was probably also that, a simple misunderstanding. Or so I’d like to believe. They always see your skin first before anything else. It’s a good thing that I was born in Houston.

Michael Brown, 18

Ferguson, Missouri, August 9, 2014

“I don’t have a gun. Stop shooting.”

Six shots including two in the head. Unarmed and stopped for jaywalking, a young Michael Brown was shot by a police officer while on his way to visit his grandmother, two days before he was set to begin classes at Vatterott College. Police later claimed that Brown had stolen cigars from a nearby store. Security camera footage showed Michael paying for cigarillos and the store owner stated that he never reported any robbery. His shooter: Darren Wilson is on paid leave and has received tens of thousands of dollars from a fundraiser in his name.

“At what age is a black boy when he learns he’s scary?”

Jonathan Lethem, The Fortress of Solitude