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Pop: A Critical Race Story of Racialized Violence in America

To be Black in America is to be looked at as aggressive, as inhuman; something to fear. The news is riddled with names of those who have had the kinds of encounters with police that we have become numb to. Any of their stories could have been used to exemplify the endemic nature of racism in this country. Much like the other stories in this edition, this work draws from the tenets of Critical Race Theory (CRT) to humanize and to centralize the voices of the historically marginalized. Specifically focusing on the intercentricity of race and racism, this story sheds light on the types of racialized violence that have become almost normalized in this country and calls for us to question and critique the status quo.

Inspired By and Loosely Based on a True Story

Nathaniel “Nate” Johnson, a newly retired veteran of the U.S. Marines, was fresh off his final tour. He was working his first shift as a bouncer at the Blue Lagoon and had only been there a couple of hours when Dylann Stephens and his friends arrived in the parking lot. Dylann Stephens was the quintessential entitled townsman who grew up in a neighboring suburb without having to work for much. He was also a regular at the Blue Lagoon, known for spending an exorbitant amount of money at the bar. Because of this, Mr. Stephens felt entitled to behave as he wanted, often treating the staff of the Blue Lagoon with little respect. Nate had heard nothing of Dylann’s previous interactions at the Blue Lagoon, but as Mr. Stephens and his friends approached the entrance to the club, Nate could immediately tell that they were going to be trouble. “ID, please” requests Nate in an even tone. “You must be new here,” Dylann responds as his friends snicker and groan behind him. “First day,” remarks Nate, coolly. “ID,” Nate reiterates while holding out his hand, firmly. “Here!” exclaims Dylann, as he reaches into his wallet and takes out his license, tossing it aggressively in Nate’s direction. “I come here all the time,” hissed Dylann, angrily. Nate catches the ID and flicks on the light of his

flashlight so that he can get a better look at the identification that was just thrown by the slim white figure standing before him. Nate scans the ID to make sure it is legitimate, and hands it back to Dylann. He then proceeds to thoroughly check the identification of Dylann's friends as well.

When their IDs all check out, Nate steps aside and says, "Thanks, you may go in." Nate opens the door, allowing Dylann's friends to enter into the establishment. The last to enter, Dylann hesitates for a moment, staring at Nate incredulously. As he approaches the door, an overpowering whiff of whiskey and Marlboros burns in Nate's nostrils. The guy was already plastered. Dylann, who is now swaying like a tall slender tree caught in a breeze, looks like he could topple over at any moment. Dylann moves closer to Nate with the same look of incredulousness on his face. Before crossing the threshold and stumbling into the club, Dylann leans in close enough for Nate to feel his hot breath on his ear as he utters a word that would make any Black person's blood boil with rage. "N****r"¹ says Dylann,² intentionally slamming his shoulder into Nate, hard, causing Nate to stammer backwards a few steps. Dylann crosses the threshold and leaves Nate behind to watch him traipse unsteadily into the establishment and up to the bar, as if nothing had happened and as if all was now right with the world.³ Nate stiffens; brows furrowed and eyes fixed onto Dylann and his friends as they converge on the bar, his entire body as tense as a board with gritted teeth and clenched hands. Nate is on the verge of following after the white culprit to find out if he had heard him correctly, and then lay hands on him, when a warm, kind voice interrupts his thoughts.

¹ I chose to not spell out the N-word as it has a triggering effect on many people, including myself.

² The N-word has been used as a racist slur since the 1800s. Over the years it would seem that open use of the word has decreased, but recently, especially in this more openly racialized Trump-era, the brazen use of the word is making a comeback (Bendix, 2017; Harvard, 2016; Nestel, 2016; Randle, 2018).

³ This is a prime example of the endemic nature of racism in this country (Bell, 1992; Solorzano & Yosso, 2000), a major tenet of Critical Race Theory (CRT). This initial interaction between Dylann and Nate exemplifies how acts of racism are ordinary occurrences for Black people and mean very little to the white American perpetrators.

“They always find a way to make a fool of themselves,” the woman says as Nate quickly turns his head, startled, having not noticed that anyone else was standing there. He sees Tina, who appears to be of Latin descent, dressed in a form-fitting black dress and wearing a shimmering silver tiara with the words “Birthday Girl” etched into the center of the wiring. She also dons a glittery golden sash that reads “Finally Twenty-One” written in fancy cursive. Apparently, Tina had been standing nearby as Dylann and his friends entered, bearing witness to the entire situation. “ID, please” booms Nate, evenly. “I’m so sorry for what he just said. Some people just don’t know how to treat others,” Tina remarks as she bashfully hands Nate her ID. “Just turned 21, huh?” says Nate, softening his tone and relaxing his shoulders with a slight smirk on his face. “Yep! Today is my birthday! I’m here with some of my friends to celebrate,” responds Tina. “Enjoy it! You only turn 21 once . . .” Nate says, and then hesitates, face darkening into a more serious grimace. “. . . and don’t worry about him. I’ve heard worse.” Tina takes her ID back and smiles genuinely as Nate smiles back. “He grabbed my friend Yasmin’s butt a few minutes ago and slurred something rude and probably racist under his breath,” she says. “But she didn’t want to make a big deal or anything. We want a drama-free night tonight. It is my birthday after all!” “Well, if he bothers you any more tonight, just let me know,” Nate replies. After making sure that all of her friends’ IDs had been checked, Tina enters the Blue Lagoon, friends in tow, and saunters towards the bar. Her sash and tiara glisten in the darkness as she walks, parting the sea of dancing silhouettes as Tina and her friends move through the small crowd. “Dang,” Nate thinks to himself, “to be 21 again . . . I met Nakia around that time . . . where has the time gone? We’ve been married for almost 20 years now!”

His shift continues without a hitch, and Nate begins to feel at ease as more and more patrons arrive, presenting identification without issue. The sting of the incident with Dylann has lessened and their interaction begins to feel like a distant memory. Inside, Tina is buzzed and having a decent time. This is her first time being out in a club in a while. Yasmin and the rest of their friends had convinced her to come out tonight, even though she insisted on staying in. Now that she was out, Tina was taking advantage of all of the attention her tiara and sash

were giving her. “Shots!” Yasmin screams, handing her a shot of something dark that looked thick like molasses and smelled like licorice. Tina looks at the small glass with uncertainty. “It’s Jäger The guys over there just bought them for us!” says Yasmin, yelling to be heard over the music. Tina downs the shot in one gulp. “Who?” she says. “The guys from earlier!” replies Yasmin nonchalantly. Tina looks at her friend with a perplexed expression on her face. “Wait, the dude that grabbed your butt?” says Tina in disbelief. “Yep! But I don’t think he remembers He was buying everyone shots at the bar” she says, as she hands Tina another shot. “Down this one and let’s see if we can get another one . . . it’s your birthday, girl!” responds Yasmin. Tina reluctantly does as she’s told and downs the new drink in a couple of gulps, trying her best not to gag.

They find a spot for their empty glasses and abandon them as they begin to weave through the crowd. As they move, Tina glances around in amazement, trailing closely behind her friends. The place had gotten really packed! The group meanders through the crowd until they reach the section of the bar that Dylann and his friends had claimed as their own. “Hey, it’s my friend’s birthday!” says Yasmin. Dylann turns to look at Tina and Yasmin, eyeing them like a lion eyes its prey.⁴ “You want a drink?” asks Dylann. “We just ordered Fireball shots, grab one of these!” He hands both ladies a shot, not waiting for an answer. “She got a name?” he says to Yasmin. “It’s Tina,” replies Tina. “Alright Tina, Cheers!” says Dylann.⁵ The trio take the shots without hesitation. “Let’s go dance! That’s my song!” screams Yasmin, as she shuffles excitedly over to the dance floor. The others follow. Tina is turning to follow suit when she suddenly

⁴ The fetishization of young Women of Color is quite common with members of the white dominant culture. Throughout history, as European settlers moved to colonize the world, many African, Indigenous, and Latin American women were raped as their communities were conquered and destroyed. The white male has the tendency to use his power to assert dominance over Women of Color, and this is seen in Dylann’s interactions with Tina and Yasmin.

⁵ Another relevant tenet of CRT is the intersectional relationship between race and gender. Race and racism are central themes of this story, but they also overlap with gender dynamics. Dylann’s interactions are both highly racialized and highly gendered, but in his interactions with Tina and her friend Yasmin, Dylann was able to set aside his racist ideology because they were “pretty girls in dresses.”

feels a warm and clammy hand forcefully latch onto her wrist. Tina turns and sees that the hand belongs to Dylann. “What are you doing?” he bellows. “You’re not gonna dance with me? I just bought you a drink!” Tina pauses before responding, choosing her words carefully. “No thanks. I’m all set,” she declares. “. . . But I appreciate the drink! I’ve never had Fireball before It was really good, thank you!” Dylann’s grip tightens, “Just one dance!” he retorts. Noticing the struggle, one of Tina’s male friends comes over to intervene. “Tina, you alright?” he asks, knocking Dylann’s hand away. “Don’t touch me, you dirty illegal!” shouts Dylann.⁶ Everything after that is a blur. A scuffle ensues and all Tina can do is try and move out of the way.

Back outside, Nate is anticipating the end of his shift. It is 1:30 a.m. and the bar is still packed. Since they are not allowing anyone else inside, the line at the entrance has dissipated. Suddenly, Nate hears one of the staff members inside yell, “Nate! Get in here!” Nate jumps into action, busting open the doors to the Blue Lagoon and wading through the hordes of people towards the source of the commotion. The lights are now on and the music has stopped. He sees several security members struggling to hold Dylann against the bar. There is broken glass, ice, and spilled drinks all over the floor. Dylann’s face is bloody and his clothes and hair are disheveled. He had clearly gotten himself into trouble again. “Get him outta here!” yells Nate. “He’s done.” The guys holding Dylann struggle to get him out to the parking lot, leaving Nate behind to examine the scene. He spots Tina and her friends not too far away, looking shook up. Nate walks over to them. “What happened?” he asks. “He was trying to dance with me, I said no and then he started shouting racist stuff at me and my friends, then they just started fighting,” Tina explained with an exasperated look on her face. “I was trying to defuse the situation but...”

Pop.

⁶ Another example of the intersectional relationship between race and gender. As soon as one of Tina’s male Latino friends intervened, Dylann made note of his ethnicity by hurling a racialized slur. This anti-immigrant sentiment expressed by Dylann also demonstrates the intercentricity of race and racism when he calls Tina’s male friend an “illegal” simply because of his ethnicity. This sentiment is often utilized conveniently by white Americans to criminalize Latinx people and “other” them.

Pop.

Pop.

Nate flinches. He had heard that all too familiar sound before, but not here...not on U.S. soil. "Geeeeet doooooown!" Nate yells at no one in particular yet everyone at the same time. The crowd scatters frantically as people look for places to take cover. Nate turns around to see Dylann walking towards them, gun in hand, with an eerie look of determination on his face. Dylann and Nate's eyes meet. Dylann looks at him and hesitates. He then aims the gun directly at Nate and pulls the trigger three more times.

Pop.

Pop.

Pop.

Nate lunges out of the way just in time but in his periphery, he sees someone drop. He crouches behind a table. Dylann walks closer and continues firing.

Pop.

Pop.

Nate can hear people screaming and crying and running. The smell of gunpowder is in the air and Dylann's gun is still smoking as he fires a few more rounds.

Pop.

Pop.

Pop.

Dylann continues walking through the crowd, edging closer to Nate's hiding spot.

Pop.

Dylann inches closer.

Pop.

Pop.

"He's got to be almost out of bullets," Nate thinks. Nate sees an opening as Dylann passes by the table that Nate is hiding behind.

Pop.

Click.

"He's out," Nate thinks as he sneaks around the table and finds himself right behind Dylann. He tackles Dylann and the gun clatters to the floor. Nate grabs the gun and shoves his knee into Dylann's back and his elbow into his neck. "Don't move!" he booms. Dylann struggles a bit but ultimately cannot move.

Feeling that he has the culprit incapacitated, Nate takes a moment to survey the area. Something catches his eye. A crimson soaked sash with the words “Finally Twenty-One” lays on the ground. There are several bodies nearby, unmoving. Nate reaches for his cellphone.

“FREEZE!” says an unfamiliar voice. “DROP YOUR WEAPON!” Nate freezes, startled. He realizes how this must look. Nate begins to turn. “I SAID DON’T MOVE!” says the voice. “Look, I work here officer.⁷ I’m a security guard for this bar and I’ve already apprehended the suspect.” In that moment Nate remembers he has his security badge on. He reaches for the badge which is dangling from his neck.

Pop.

Pop.

Pop.

Pop.

Pop.

Pop.

Nate drops to the ground, stunned. “YOU OK, SIR?” the officer runs to check on Dylann,⁸ who is still on his stomach, and helps him to his feet as he investigates the surrounding area. “SUSPECT DOWN” the officer bellows into his radio.⁹ Nate’s eyes fall shut as images pop into his head. Nakia. The moment he proposed. Their wedding day. The births of their two kids. The purchase of their first home. Memories continue to flash before Nate’s eyes as a warm pool forms around him and everything fades to black.

END.

⁷ Throughout history, the Black community has had a tense relationship with the police. The historical roots of law enforcement sprouted during the times of slavery.

⁸ Another, more glaring example that demonstrates the permanence of racism in our country. The officer made a snap judgement as he surveyed the scene, observing that there were several victims and a potential assailant with a weapon who was possibly reaching for another. In the cop’s eyes, the only possible villain to this story had to be the Black man in front of him. There was no other option.

⁹ The fact that the officer checked on Dylann after shooting Nate with no question about who the culprit could be is a direct result of the criminalization of Black men that has become ingrained in the minds of the general public.

Discussion

On Sunday, November 11, 2018, another innocent Black man was killed by the police. This time the crime took place in the city of Robbins, Illinois. The young man, 26-year-old Jemel Roberson, was working as a security guard at “Manny’s Blue Room Bar” at the time of his murder (Gardner, 2018). Similar to Nate in my story, Jemel was murdered because the responding officers mistakenly took him for the suspect instead of the hero.¹⁰ We live in a world where the threat of being killed by a cop as a Black person is astronomical, yet Black people are positioned as the ones to be feared. Instead of being deemed the hero of this story, Jemel (and Nate) ultimately became the victims of yet another act of racialized violence against the Black community committed by the police.

Jemel’s death was the inspiration for this particular story, but there are countless additional victims who have fallen at the hands of the police. Any of their stories could have been used to exemplify the endemic nature of racism in this country (Bell, 1992; Solorzano & Yosso, 2000) and its manifestation in the form of police brutality. In recent years, there have been countless police shootings of unarmed Black men, women, and children. Oscar Grant, Eric Garner, Tamir Rice, Philando Castile, Freddie Gray, Sandra Bland, Alton Sterling, Atatiana Jefferson, Michael Brown, Botham Jean, Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, George Floyd and countless others have been murdered living their lives while being Black. These names are important and should be remembered. Their souls may be at rest, but the pain is everlasting, with the culprits hardly ever facing justice.

The legacy of colonialism, white supremacy, and institutional racism continues to plague this country. If you open your eyes and take a look around, you can bear witness to the persisting remnants of colonialism, white supremacy, and institutional racism. You will also see how angry and fed up and physically, mentally, and emotionally drained Black people are. Why is it that in this country a Black man is more likely to be

¹⁰ According to witnesses, Jemel had reportedly asked a few drunk patrons to leave and one of them returned with a gun, injuring at least four people (Grossman, 2018). Jemel returned fire and eventually apprehended the suspect (Lockhart, 2018). His fate was the same as Nate’s in this story; murdered because he was “mistaken” as the suspect instead of the hero.

murdered by a police officer or thrown in jail than to go to college? How is it that the Black body is criminalized in such a manner that Black students cannot even attend schools without being over scrutinized and over disciplined?¹¹ What does it mean to bring a Black child into a world that hates them? What are the conversations that Black parents have had to have generation after generation to attempt to protect their children from the centuries of hatred and anti-Blackness (Dumas, 2015) that has culminated from the intercentricity of race and racism in this country? And what are the conversations that are *not* being had by white parents to their white children, by teachers in schools, and by society writ large about institutional racism?

Although race is a social construct, it is very real for Black people. As a Black male, I have seen race and racism present itself in the way people walk faster or lock their doors when a Black person walks behind them, or in the ways police criminalize and hyper surveil the behaviors of the Black community. We can witness the impacts of race in the commentary surrounding the protests and looting during the 2020 George Floyd riots.¹² It appears in the disproportionate numbers of Black folks diagnosed and killed by Covid-19.¹³ It can be seen in the ways predominantly Black schools have inadequate and inequitable resources and how Black students are more likely to be placed in special education classrooms than in gifted classrooms (Ford, 2014; The Education Trust-West, 2015). It shows in the “bootstraps logic” of many folks who deem Black people lazy and unworthy of help or opportunity. It is evident in the ways that four-year colleges and universities regularly deny Black applicants, funneling them into the community college pipeline, which in many ways pushes them further away from their goals. It is demonstrated in deficit-based

¹¹ Black children (boys especially) are being disciplined out of classrooms at alarming rates (Wood, Harris, & Howard, 2018).

¹² George Floyd was murdered by a white police officer for allegedly trying to use a forged twenty-dollar bill. The police officers proceeded to forcefully arrest him and killed him in the process while literally kneeling on his neck to hold him in place as if he were an animal. Following the unlawful death of unarmed George Floyd, protests erupted in Minnesota and [across the nation](#) (CNN, 2020).

¹³ The 2020 Covid-19 pandemic resulted in the [disproportionate numbers of Black deaths](#) across the nation due to systemic racism and disparities in access to quality health care (Ellis, 2020).

narratives inspired by academic research done *on* Black communities instead of *for or with* Black communities. It is seen in the prisons that are filled with Black and Brown bodies and in the way marijuana legalization is making white people even more wealthy while Black people are still rotting in prisons for drug-related crimes (Resing, 2019).

There are countless other manners in which race and racism manifests within the daily lives of Black people in this country. One example is how Black protestors are vilified and threatened by Mr. Trump for protesting injustices that have gone on for far too long.¹⁴ Yet white protestors have been allowed to protest stay at home orders related to the Covid-19 pandemic with guns and were heralded for their actions by the current president.¹⁵ Furthermore, white supremacists were in many ways vindicated by the president for their protests even when they've led to catastrophic events and multiple casualties.¹⁶ In this counterstory, Dylann Stephens¹⁷ represents a composite of the entitled white men who have incited fear and terror through mass shootings in this country and who we rarely deem "the problem." Instead, white domestic terrorists are seen as "mentally ill" rather than as the criminals that they are. Even following the vile acts they have committed, it is typical these white shooters take their own lives or are apprehended *alive*

¹⁴ On May 29, 2020, Donald Trump tweeted "when the looting starts, the shooting starts" in response to the George Floyd protests. This comment dates back to the 1960s, a statement made by a Miami police chief that was denounced and heavily criticized by the NAACP and other Civil Rights activists at the time for inciting violence (Wines, 2020).

¹⁵ In response to the Coronavirus shutdowns and stay at home orders, white protestors rallied in Michigan toting guns. The president tweeted "LIBERATE MICHIGAN" in response to these protestors, seemingly because they were white and supporters of Trump's vision to re-open the economy before medical experts advised (Liptak, 2020).

¹⁶ Following the violent outcomes after protests in Charlottesville, Virginia regarding the removal of a Confederate statue, Mr. Trump claimed there were "good people on both sides" (Shear & Haberman, 2017). However, many of the protestors were neo-Nazis and members of the Ku Klux Klan, groups known for their hatred of and violence towards Black people and People of Color.

¹⁷ This name was created by combining the first and middle names of white domestic terrorists Dylann Roof, the white supremacist charged with committing a mass shooting in a Black church in Charleston, South Carolina, and Connor Stephen Betts, the 24-year-old who shot and killed nine people, including his own sister, at a bar in Dayton, Ohio.

instead of being murdered by the police. Unfortunately, for Black people, we are not given the same benefit of the doubt. Black victims of unarmed police shootings are instantly criminalized and deemed deserving of their fates. The public uses any reason to excuse and dismiss the cop's criminal actions ultimately resulting in the acquittals of the officers, leaving justice unserved for the victims of racial injustice and police brutality.

The tense relationship between the Black community and the police sprouted during the times of slavery. Slave patrols which were responsible for tracking runaway slaves and quelling slave riots, were the template for the very first police officers (Carter, 2015). It is no wonder that law enforcement has become synonymous with the over-policing of Black and Brown bodies. It was by design. However, the resiliency of the Black community is something to be revered. With centuries of hatred, biased laws and policies, and unfair advantages for other racialized groups, the Black community is still alive and thriving. Black people have learned to navigate the system in ways that very few groups have had to, and it is the resiliency of the Black community that makes us strong. The resilience of the Black community is what gives me hope that Jemel and the other victims of racialized violence and police brutality will become more than mere stories. I hope their sacrifices will act as the impetus for a new direction for Black people in this country; a direction that will include our collective liberation from the bonds of social and racial injustice. I envision a world where all members of the Black community can live freely without fear of being "lynched" ¹⁸ by police officers who are charged with the mantra "to protect and serve."

I invite the readers of this special issue to imagine this new world with me. I also challenge you all to confront the racist notions this country was built upon, in order to make room for the new world that we all deserve—one with a foundation of collectivist mindsets and shared understanding. This new world must also be built in opposition to the racist, anti-Black ideologies that have steered this country away from justice. With the 2020 protests reverberating around the world, we can

¹⁸ Police killings of unarmed Black women, men and children have been rightfully likened to lynchings during slavery and the Jim Crow era (McLaughlin, 2020).

be hopeful for collective change. Yet the aims of the movements of today will not be met until all Black lives matter.

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