BODY

BODILY RACIST: One who is perceiving certain racialized bodies as more animal-like and violent than others.

BODILY ANTIRACIST: One who is humanizing, deracializing, and individualizing nonviolent and violent behavior.

DONE. FINISHED WEARING uniforms. Through with attending chapel service. The older I became, the more I despised the conformity of private schooling and churching. After eighth grade, I was finally free of them. I enrolled in John Bowne High School, a public school that my Haitian neighbor Gil attended. It was in Flushing, in central Queens, just across the street from Queens College. We bathed in the ambient noise of the nearby Long Island Expressway.

In the mid-1950s, public-housing authorities allowed my grandmother to move into the predominantly White Pomonok Houses, due south of John Bowne. Dad went through all of his local elementary schooling in the late 1950s without noticing another Black student, only the kids of working-class White families, who were even then fixing to flee to suburban Long Island. By 1996 they were nearly all gone.

After school, John Bowne students jammed into public buses like clothes jammed into a drawer. As my bus made its way toward Southside Queens, it slowly emptied. On this day, I stood near the back door, facing a teenage boy we called Smurf, a nickname

he earned from his short, skinny frame, blue-black skin, thick ears, and big round eyes that nearly met in the center of his face.

As I stood near him, Smurf reached into his pants and pulled out a black pistol. He stared at it and I stared at it, too. Everyone did. Smurf looked up and pointed the gun—loaded or unloaded?—directly at me. "You scared, yo?" he asked with almost brotherly warmth, a smirk resting on his face.

"BLACKS MUST UNDERSTAND and acknowledge the roots of White fear in America," President Bill Clinton said in a speech on October 16, 1995, the same day as the Million Man March. He'd escaped the march and the Black men assembling practically on the White House lawn for the campus of the University of Texas. "There is a legitimate fear of the violence that is too prevalent in our urban areas," he added. "By experience or at least what people see on the news at night, violence for those White people too often has a Black face."

History tells the same story: Violence for White people really has too often had a Black face—and the consequences have landed on the Black body across the span of American history. In 1631, Captain John Smith warned the first English colonizers of New England that the Black body was as devilish as any people in the world. Boston pastor Cotton Mather preached compliance to slavery in 1696: Do not "make yourself infinitely Blacker than you are already." Virginia lieutenant-governor Hugh Drysdale spoke of "the Cruel disposition of those Creatures" who planned a freedom revolt in 1723. Seceding Texas legislators in 1861 complained of not receiving more federal "appropriations for protecting . . . against ruthless savages." U.S. senator Benjamin Tillman told his colleagues in 1903, "The poor African has become a fiend, a wild beast, seeking whom he may devour." Two leading criminologists posited in 1967 that the "large . . . criminal display of the violence among minority groups such as Negroes" stems from their "subculture-of-violence." Manhattan Institute fellow

Heather Mac Donald wrote "The core criminal-justice population is the black underclass" in *The War on Cops* in 2016.

This is the living legacy of racist power, constructing the Black race biologically and ethnically and presenting the Black body to the world first and foremost as a "beast," to use Gomes de Zurara's term, as violently dangerous, as the dark embodiment of evil. Americans today see the Black body as larger, more threatening, more potentially harmful, and more likely to require force to control than a similarly sized White body, according to researchers. No wonder the Black body had to be lynched by the thousands, deported by the tens of thousands, incarcerated by the millions, segregated by the tens of millions.

WHEN I FIRST picked up a basketball, at around eight years old, I also picked up on my parents' fears for my Black body. My parents hated when I played ball at nearby parks, worried I'd get shot, and tried to discourage me by warning me of the dangers waiting for me out there. In their constant fearmongering about Black drug dealers, robbers, killers, they nurtured in me a fear of my own Black neighbors. When I proposed laying concrete in our grassy backyard and putting up a basketball hoop there, my father built a court faster than a house flipper, a nicer one than the courts at nearby parks. But the new basketball court could not keep me away from my own dangerous Black body. Or from Smurf on the bus.

"NAW, YO," I coolly responded to Smurf's question about my fear. My eyes locked on the gun.

"Whatever, man," he snickered. "You scared, yo." Then he jammed the gun in my ribs and offered a hard smile.

I looked him straight in the eye, scared as hell. "Naw, yo," I said, giggling a little, "but that's a nice piece, though."

"It is, ain't it?"

Satisfied, Smurf turned, gun in hand, and looked for somebody else to scare. I exhaled relief but knew I could have been harmed that day, as I could have other days. Especially, I thought, inside John Bowne High School, surrounded by other Black and Latinx and Asian teens.

Moving through John Bowne's hallways, eyes sharper than my pencils, I avoided stepping on new sneakers like they were land mines (though when I did accidentally step on one, nothing exploded). I avoided bumping into people, worried a bump could become a hole in my head (though when I did inevitably bump into someone, my head stayed intact). I avoided making eye contact, as if my classmates were wolves (though when I did, my body did not get attacked). I avoided crews, fearing they would flock at me at any moment (though when I did have to pass through a crew, I didn't get jumped). What could happen based on my deepest fears mattered more than what did happen to me. I believed violence was stalking me—but in truth I was being stalked inside my own head by racist ideas.

Crews ran my high school—like crews run America—and I considered joining the Zulu Nation, awed by its history and reach. Witnessing an initiation changed my mind. The perverse mix of punches and stomps, handshakes and hugs, turned me off. But I did have an informal crew, bound by an ironclad loyalty that required us to fight for each other, should the occasion arise.

One day we met another crew on a block near the Long Island Expressway—maybe five of us and fifteen of them, all staring menacingly at each other as we approached. This was new to me, the showdown, the curses flying and landing, the escalating displays of anger. Threats slamming like fists. I was in the mix with the rest of them—but passing drivers glancing over could not see that I was fighting my nervousness more than anything.

One threat led to another. No one rushed me, as small and unassuming as I was. I saw big Gil fighting off punches. I wanted to help him, but then I saw a tall, skinny, solitary teen looking around nervously. He reminded me of myself. I crept up behind

him and jump-threw a vicious right hook. He went down hard on the pavement and I skittered off. Soon we heard sirens and scattered like ants, fearful of getting smashed by the NYPD.

WE WERE UNARMED, but we knew that Blackness armed us even though we had no guns. Whiteness disarmed the cops—turned them into fearful potential victims—even when they were approaching a group of clearly outstrapped and anxious high school kids. Black people comprise 13 percent of the U.S. population. And yet, in 2015, Black bodies accounted for at least 26 percent of those killed by police, declining slightly to 24 percent in 2016, 22 percent in 2017, and 21 percent in 2018, according to *The Washington Post*. Unarmed Black bodies—which apparently look armed to fearful officers—are about twice as likely to be killed as unarmed White bodies.

Gil and I ran over the Long Island Expressway overpass and hopped onto a departing bus, feeling lucky, catching our breath. I could have gone to jail, or worse, that day.

More than the times I risked jail, I am still haunted by the times I did not help the victims of violence. My refusal to help them jailed me in fear. I was as scared of the Black body as the White body was scared of me. I could not muster the strength to do right. Like that time on another packed bus after school. A small Indian teen—tinier than me!—sat near me at the back of the bus that day. My seat faced the back door, and the Indian teen sat in the single seat right next to the back door. I kept staring at him, trying to catch his eye so I could give him a nod that would direct him to the front of the bus. I saw other Black and Indian kids on the bus trying to do the same with their eyes. We wanted so badly for him to move. But he was fixated on whatever was playing on his fresh new Walkman. His eyes were closed and his head bobbed.

Smurf and his boys were on the bus that day, too. For the moment, they were blocked from the Indian teen by the bodies of other kids—they couldn't see him sitting there. But when the bus

cleared enough for them to have a clear lane to him, Smurf, as expected, focused in on the thing we didn't want him to see.

He did not have his pistol that day. Or maybe he did.

Smurf motioned to his boys and stood up. He walked a few feet and stood over the Indian teen, his back to me, his head turned to face his boys.

"What the fuck!"

He pointed his finger, gun-like, at the seated teen's head. "Look at this motherfucker!"

IN 1993, A bipartisan group of White legislators introduced the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act. They were thinking about Smurf—and me. The Congressional Black Caucus was also thinking about Smurf and me. They asked for $2 billion more in the act for drug treatment and $3 billion more for violence-prevention programs. When Republicans called those items "welfare for criminals" and demanded they be scaled back for their votes, Democratic leaders caved. Twenty-six of the thirty-eight voting members of the Congressional Black Caucus caved, too. After all, the bill reflected their fear for my Black body—and of it. The policy decision reflected their dueling consciousness—and their practical desire to not lose the prevention funding entirely in a rewrite of the bill. On top of its new prisons, capital offenses, minimum sentences, federal three-strike laws, police officers, and police weaponry, the law made me eligible, when I turned thirteen in 1995, to be tried as an adult. "Never again should Washington put politics and party above law and order," President Bill Clinton said upon signing the bipartisan, biracial bill on September 13, 1994.

"YO, NIGGA, RUN that Walkman," Smurf said rather gently. The kid did not look up, still captivated by the beat coming from his headphones. Smurf punch-tapped him on the shoulder. "Yo, nigga, run that Walkman," he shouted.

I wanted to stand up and yell, "Leave that nigga alone. Why you always fucking with people, Smurf? What the fuck is wrong with you?" But my fear caged me. I remained seated and quiet.

The kid finally looked up, startled. "What!" The shock of Smurf looming over him and the loudness of the music made him raise his voice. I shook my head but without shaking my head. I remained still.

CLINTON DEMOCRATS THOUGHT they had won the political turf war to own crime as an issue—to war on the Black body for votes. But it took little time for racist Americans to complain that even the most expensive crime bill in human history was not enough to stop the beast, the devil, the gun, Smurf, me. Around Thanksgiving in 1995, Princeton political scientist John J. DiIulio Jr. warned of the "coming of the super-predators," especially young bodies like mine in "Black inner-city neighborhoods." DiIulio later said he regretted using the term. But DiIulio never had to internalize this racist idea and look at his own body in fear. He never had to deal with being hunted. My friends at John Bowne did. I did. In 1996, I turned fourteen. A super-predator was growing in me, in Smurf, they said. I believed what I heard.

"Most inner-city children grow up surrounded by teenagers and adults who are themselves deviant, delinquent or criminal," DiIulio wrote. Watch out. "A new generation of street criminals is upon us—the youngest, biggest and baddest generation any society has ever known," he warned. My band of "juvenile 'super-predators'" were "radically impulsive, brutally remorseless youngsters, including ever more preteenage boys, who murder, assault, rape, rob, burglarize, deal deadly drugs, join gun-toting gangs and create serious communal disorders." We, the young Black super-predators, were apparently being raised with an unprecedented inclination toward violence—in a nation that presumably did not raise White slaveholders, lynchers, mass incarcerators, police officers, corporate officials, venture capitalists, financiers, drunk drivers, and war hawks to be violent.

This swarm of super-predators never materialized in the late 1990s. Violent crime had already begun its dramatic decline by the time I stared at Smurf demanding that Walkman in 1996. Homicides had dropped to their lowest levels since the Reagan era, when intense crack-market competition and unregulated gun trafficking spiked the rate.

But crime bills have never correlated to crime any more than fear has correlated to actual violence. We are not meant to fear suits with policies that kill. We are not meant to fear good White males with AR-15s. No, we are to fear the weary, unarmed Latinx body from Latin America. The Arab body kneeling to Allah is to be feared. The Black body from hell is to be feared. Adept politicians and crime entrepreneurs manufacture the fear and stand before voters to deliver them—messiahs who will liberate them from fear of these other bodies.

"NIGGA, YOU DIDN'T hear me!" Smurf fumed. "I said run that fucking Walkman!"

In my mind I tried to devise a strategy for the poor kid, imagining myself in his place. I had a bit of a gift for staying calm and defusing potentially volatile situations, which served me well whether I was dealing with the violently finicky Smurfs of the world or capriciously violent police officers. I learned to disarm or avoid the Smurfs around town—kids bent on mayhem. But I also saw that strangers were doing the same calculations when they saw me coming—I'd see the fear in their eyes. They'd see me and decide they were looking at Smurf. We scared them just the same—all they saw were our dangerous Black bodies. Cops seemed especially fearful. Just as I learned to avoid the Smurfs of the world, I had to learn to keep racist police officers from getting nervous. Black people are apparently responsible for calming the fears of violent cops in the way women are supposedly responsible for calming the sexual desires of male rapists. If we don't, then we are blamed for our own assaults, our own deaths.

But at that point, the kid across from me was out of options—

there was probably no way to defuse the situation. "Run that fucking Walkman!" Smurf yelled, now turning heads at the front of the bus and most likely prompting the bus driver to call the ruckus in. The shocked teen started to stand up, saying nothing, just shaking his head. He probably intended to relocate to the front, near the relative safety of the bus driver. But as soon as he straightened his body, Smurf landed a side haymaker to the kid's temple—his head bounced into the window and then onto the bus's floor. Smurf snatched the tumbling Walkman, and then his boys got up to join in. The kid covered his face when the stomps from Timberland boots came pummeling down. It all happened right in front of me. I did nothing. I did nothing.

The bus stopped. The back door opened. Smurf and his boys leapt off and ran away, lighthearted, grinning. But I noticed that four-eyes from Smurf's crew remained on the bus, lurking and looking, seemingly waiting for somebody to help this kid laid out in agony. I did nothing.

THE RESPONSIBILITY OF keeping myself safe followed me like the stray dogs in my neighborhood, barking fear into my consciousness. I never wanted to arrive home to my parents with empty pockets and no shoes, with a leaking, beaten body like the Indian kid. Or worse, no arrival at all, only a letter from the police reporting my murder, or a phone call from the hospital. I convinced my parents (or so I thought) I was safe. But I did not convince myself. The acts of violence I saw from Smurf and others combined with the racist ideas all around me to convince me that more violence lurked than there actually was. I believed that violence didn't define just Smurf but all the Black people around me, my school, my neighborhood. I believed it defined me—that I should fear all darkness, up to and including my own Black body.

Those of us Black writers who grew up in "inner city" Black neighborhoods too often recall the violence we experienced more than the nonviolence. We don't write about all those days

we were not faced with guns in our ribs. We don't retell all those days we did not fight, the days we didn't watch someone get beaten in front of us. We become exactly like the nightly local news shows—if it bleeds, it leads—and our stories center on violent Black bodies instead of the overwhelming majority of nonviolent Black bodies. In 1993, near the height of urban violent crime, for every thousand urban residents, seventy-four, or 7.4 percent, reported being victims of violent crime, a percentage that declined further thereafter. In 2016, for every thousand urban residents, about thirty, or 3 percent, reported being victims of violent crimes. These numbers are not precise. Researchers estimate that more than half of violent crimes from 2006 to 2010 went unreported to law enforcement. And even being around violent crime can create adverse effects. But the idea that directly experienced violence is endemic and everywhere, affecting everyone, or even most people—that Black neighborhoods, as a whole, are more dangerous than "war zones," to use President Trump's term—is not reality.

It all makes sense that this is the story we so often tell—the fist-swinging and gunshots and early deaths cling to us like a second skin, while the hugs and dances and good times fall away. But the writer's work reflects, and the reader consumes, those vivid, searing memories, not the everyday lived reality of the Black body.

As many moments as I had of anxiety and fear from other Black bodies, I probably lived many more moments in serenity and peace. As much as I feared that violence stalked me, my daily life was not organized around that fear. I played baseball for years with White kids on Long Island and always wondered why they never wanted to visit my neighborhood, my home. When I would ask, the looks of horror on their faces, and even more on their parents' faces, startled and confused me. I knew there were dangers on my block; I also thought it was safe.

I did not connect the whole or even most of Southside Queens with violence, just as I did not connect all or even most of my Black neighbors with violence. Certain people like Smurf, cer-

tain blocks, and certain neighborhoods I knew to avoid. But not because they were Black—we were almost all Black. I knew in a vague way that Black neighborhoods with high-rise public housing like 40P (the South Jamaica Houses) or Baisley Park Houses were known to be more violent than neighborhoods like mine, Queens Village, with more single-family homes, but I never really thought about why. But I knew it wasn't Blackness—Blackness was a constant.

A study that used National Longitudinal Survey of Youth data from 1976 to 1989 found that young Black males engaged in more violent crime than young White males. But when the researchers compared only employed young males of both races, the differences in violent behavior vanished. Or, as the Urban Institute stated in a more recent report on long-term unemployment, "Communities with a higher share of long-term unemployed workers also tend to have higher rates of crime and violence."

Another study found that the 2.5 percent decrease in unemployment between 1992 and 1997 resulted in a decrease of 4.3 percent for robbery, 2.5 percent for auto theft, 5 percent for burglary, and 3.7 percent for larceny. Sociologist Karen F. Parker strongly linked the growth of Black-owned businesses to a reduction in Black youth violence between 1990 and 2000. In recent years, the University of Chicago Crime Lab worked with the One Summer Chicago Plus jobs program and found a 43 percent reduction in violent-crime arrests for Black youths who worked eight-week-long part-time summer jobs, compared with a control group of teens who did not.

In other words, researchers have found a much stronger and clearer correlation between violent-crime levels and unemployment levels than between violent crime and race. Black neighborhoods do not all have similar levels of violent crime. If the cause of the violent crime is the Black body, if Black people are violent demons, then the violent-crime levels would be relatively the same no matter where Black people live. But Black upper-income and middle-income neighborhoods tend to have less vio-

lent crime than Black low-income neighborhoods—as is the case in non-Black communities. But that does not mean low-income Black people are more violent than high-income Black people. That means low-income neighborhoods struggle with unemployment and poverty—and their typical byproduct, violent crime.

For decades, there have been three main strategies in reducing violent crime in Black neighborhoods. Segregationists who consider Black neighborhoods to be war zones have called for tough policing and the mass incarceration of super-predators. Assimilationists say these super-predators need tough laws and tough love from mentors and fathers to civilize them back to nonviolence. Antiracists say Black people, like all people, need more higher-paying jobs within their reach, especially Black youngsters, who have consistently had the highest rates of unemployment of any demographic group, topping 50 percent in the mid-1990s.

There is no such thing as a dangerous racial group. But there are, of course, dangerous individuals like Smurf. There is the violence of racism—manifest in policy and policing—that fears the Black body. And there is the nonviolence of antiracism that does not fear the Black body, that fears, if anything, the violence of the racism that has been set on the Black body.

Perceptions of danger and actual threats met me each day at John Bowne, in various forms. There was the dangerous disinterest of some teachers. Or the school's dangerous overcrowding: three thousand students packed into a school built for far fewer. The classes were so large—twice as large as in my private schools—that detached students like me were able to hold our own back-of-the-room classes before detached teachers. I do not remember a single teacher or class or lesson or assignment from ninth grade. I was checked out—following the lead of most of the teachers, administrators, and politicians who were ostensibly in charge of my education. I attended John Bowne like someone who clocked in to his job with no intention of working. I only worked hard on my first love.