

White Guys in Trucks: Symbols of Violence and Weapons of Racial Injustice

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Abstract: Predominately white colleges and universities situated in small white college towns can present Black faculty and students with a complex array of challenges and opportunities. This paper recounts the actions taken by a young Black male student and middle-aged Black female faculty in response to a racist incident the student experienced. The student and faculty experiences of the incident, and their subsequent individual and collective responses, and efforts to seek justice demonstrate the ways in which they navigate the intersections of race, gender, age, and position within the academy and its surrounding community. Their reflections coincide, overlap, and diverge at various times through the roles they play in this process of change.

Keywords: racism, predominately white campus life, fraternities, race-based incident stress, law enforcement, social justice advocacy, faculty and student support

Student – The Incident

It was a nice day out on a Saturday afternoon, so I decided to take my dog out for a walk around my apartment complex. As I made my way across the complex, it seemed to be a typical walk in the park, no pun intended. I was walking down the hill getting ready to cross the street. I saw this white car attempting to parallel park directly in front of me. I also heard a car approaching me to the left. I am very familiar with the complex and I knew that there was a stop sign at the bottom of the hill, so I continued to walk across the street. As I made my way to the middle of the street, I heard the car hit the break, but did not come to a complete stop. I was confused, but I continued towards my path and as I took another step a black truck emerged in front of me. I pulled my dog close and held her back so she would not be in the way as I halted my next step. The black Tahoe emerged passed me as the passengers who were all White began to laugh. The passenger side was the side that had cut me off, so I was unable to see the driver until he had passed me all the way. As he moved forward, he eased by and stuck his arm out as if he was taunting me to react. I had my arms up in the air confused and pissed the fuck off because of what had just happened. I feel like my manhood had been tested. As a black man, I really felt like I was being tested. Instead of pulling out my phone and taking a picture of the license plate because of my confusion and anger, I focused on a particular fraternity sticker on the back of the truck. All I could think was damn, really? I made it back to my apartment and the first thing that I did was email the president of the fraternity located on

campus.

Faculty – Secondary Race-based Traumatic Stress

I was relaxing at home on a leisurely warm Saturday afternoon when at 1:36pm I received a text from Braedon (pseudonym). A text that immediately conjured up fears I imagine must be familiar to every parent or caregiver of a young black male in a world in which black men are targets of systemic harassment, abuse, and injustice. I sat down and braced myself as I read his experience of being physically threatened and taunted by white guys in a truck as he crossed the street with his dog. He ended the text with, “This is racism at its best.” Feelings of anger and helplessness begin to flare and collide in me as my body stiffened automatically in a feeble attempt to protect myself from the ensuing vulnerability creeping up on me. I thought about Braedon’s safety and how much I want to protect him from this living hell of racial strife. Spontaneously traumatic memories were triggered and I flashed back to reports of murder and mayhem committed by white guys in their trucks. I remembered the haunting murder of James Byrd, Jr. an African American man who was beaten, and dragged, in 1998, for three miles chained by his ankles to a pickup truck driven by three white guys in Jasper, Texas. According to news reports, James had accepted a ride home from the men, one of whom he knew, after leaving his nieces’ bridal shower (Chandler, 2012). Flooded with adrenaline, I could not stop myself from thinking of James Craig Anderson, another innocent Black man beaten, run over, and killed intentionally in 2011 by a truckload of white male teens in Jackson, Mississippi when he was approaching his car in the parking lot

after work (Pettus, 2012). My heart and mind continued to race with images and thoughts of Toussaint Harrison, a defenseless black man deliberately targeted, run over, and killed by Joseph Paul Leonard, a white guy driving a green Chevy pickup truck in 2013 in Sacramento county, California. Mr. Leonard was arrested for vehicular assault and later charged and convicted of murder. Described by reports as a racially motivated killing, witnesses stated Leonard got out of his truck and kicked Mr. Harrison several times in the head with his steel-toed work boots after running him over (Furillo, 2014). I felt inundated and overwhelmed with these intrusive thoughts, images, and emotions for several minutes after reading Braedon's text. Race-related stress researchers recognize the potency of racism-related life events, whether experienced daily or witnessed collectively or vicariously (Harrell, 2000), to evoke intense emotional and psychological stress and reactions in people of color (Franklin, Boyd-Franklin, & Kelly, 2006).

I am a Black woman old enough to have personal memories that call forth visceral responses to incidents of racial violence. I have lived long enough to experience and bear witness to the atrocities of racial oppression and its impact on the lives of Black people generationally. Moreover, the stark and brutal legacy of segregation and discrimination has been transmitted to me through stories of race-based trauma and survival experienced by my elders, some of who are approaching the status of centenarian. Researchers posit that historical and contemporary race-based trauma is a part of the "collective memory" (Franklin et al., 2004, p.15) of people of color in America (Harrell, 2000; Leary, 2005). I am also a social work activist, educator, and a researcher of violence, trauma, and recovery in the lives of African American families. I remind myself that race-based traumatic stress – the chronic stress caused by experiences of racism – often resembles traditional symptoms of trauma including intrusive thoughts, avoidance, and arousal (Carter, 20007a) and that processing trauma sometimes involves the intrusion of upsetting memories (Briere & Scott, 2013). I mentally coaxed myself back to the present as I was hit by an epiphany. Over time, I have come to unconsciously associate white guys in trucks with racial violence and injustice. The cells of my body feel like they are seared with terrorizing images of Blacks being harassed, threatened, and otherwise

killed by white guys in trucks. Much like the confederate flag, white hooded men and women, cross burnings, the hang noose, and bullwhip – white guys in trucks symbolize weapons of brutality, hatred, and race-based incidents of violence meted out against Black people for centuries. These powerful cultural symbols are a part of the landscape of America and hold significant meaning (Blumer, 1969) in motivating me to confront oppressive practices, support recovery and healing, and promote social and economic justice.

Now it is two years after the last known incident of racially motivated vehicular homicide, and another unarmed innocent young Black man has his life and safety threatened by some white guys in a truck, this time while he is out walking his dog. This time it is in the northern region of a southern city with a prideful reputation of being more progressive and more inclusive than the "rest of the Delta" – the shorthand local reference used to describe the southern part of the state with a reputation for cultural and political conservatism. This time the chapter of the Greek organization, founded in the Deep South about a decade before the emancipation of enslaved Blacks, is on a predominately white university campus with a legacy of legalized racial discrimination known as Jim Crow. This time the Black man who survives this racially motivated incident is a graduate student in the school of social work. He is my graduate assistant, my mentee, and much like a son to me. The irony is not lost on me that I recruited him specifically to assist me in conducting research on ways to effectively engage boys and men in ending violence. This time collectively we take action to confront the brutal, race-based, violence perpetrated by these particular white guys in their truck.

As an activist inspired by the civil rights movement and the stories of my grandparents who were born in and migrated from the "rest of the Delta" in 1944 to create a safer and prosperous life for their family, I knew I had to act. How exactly, I wasn't sure. All too familiar, however, with the frequency with which race-based incidents can be dismissed, minimized, and ignored, (Franklin, et al., 2006), I wanted, at a minimum, to validate Braedon's experience, affirm his judgments and encourage him to take legal action. I texted him back, "Yes it is. I'm very sorry you experienced that Braedon. I would encourage you to report it to the city police as well."

Student – City Police Report

I contacted the city police. After explaining the situation, the first police officer that I spoke with asked me “Were there any words said that were racist in any way?” I continued to add that the act alone was a racial statement and it was in fact an act of intimidation. The officer then transferred me to another officer and I once again explained the situation. I gave a description of the vehicle without the license plate information. “I don’t know what we can do,” the officer claimed, “because I’m sure there are a lot of black Tahoes that fit the description.” He assured me he would file the report.

Faculty – Support and Guidance

I sat and watched my phone with anticipation and anxiety waiting for a response to my text. Within a few seconds, the phone lit up with a text from Braedon, “Yes ma’am. I was pissed...I’m going to get to the bottom of this. So irritated.”

“Your frustration is totally understandable and a healthy response to the racist behavior,” I texted back immediately, intentional in an effort to affirm him, and validate his experience and feelings. I continued cautiously offering Braedon a directive that I hoped conveyed my respect for his right to self-determine how he would “get to the bottom of this” and deal with his anger but also my confidence that he would choose to attend to his feelings and the situation responsibly:

As a gentle reminder, you’ll want to channel your anger and irritation constructively. I know you already know this. Again, it’s just a gentle reminder. I’m glad that you texted me and let’s keep in touch as you move through your emotions about this okay?

I needed Braedon to know, in no uncertain terms, that he could count on me as a resource, a sounding board, to manage his emotions in a healthy and productive manner. Several scholars note that emotional upset, anger, and psychological stress are natural responses to the daily and inevitable experiences of racial microaggressions, blatant and otherwise, structural and individual that people of color experience at some point during their life course (Carter, 2007b; Franklin, 2004). Some researchers recognize racism as a form of emotional

abuse (Sanchez-Hucles, 1998) that can result in detrimental behavioral and mental health problems, if not acknowledged and addressed, including substance abuse, depression, grief, reduced self-worth, isolation, anger, and internalized racism (Bryant-Davis, 2007; Bryant-Davis & Ocampo, 2005; Franklin, 2004; Kelly, 2004; Sorsoli, 2007). Within seconds of sending the text, my phone rang. “I hope I’m not bugging you,” I recognized the voice on the other end as Braedon. I sighed with relief at the opportunity to discuss the incident and offer my continued support and guidance.

Student – Campus Police Report

With all of this confusion and frustration, I contacted my mentor Dr. Veronica (pseudonym) and she helped me through the situation by being the only one up to this point to provide me with support. She suggested that I contact campus police. I contacted campus police and made them aware of the situation and they told me they would check the city police report. One sergeant of the campus police force contacted me back shortly and let me know that the city police department did not file a report. This honestly pissed me off because they clearly did not give a fuck about my safety!

The campus sergeant, sounding unsurprised by the incident, told me, “I can search the fraternity’s parking lot for the vehicle, but I also suggest that you contact Fraternities to keep them updated with the situation.” He ended with, “if the president of the fraternity does not get back with you or if you are not satisfied with his response, we will help you take this to a higher board.” I followed each step accordingly, while keeping my mentor in the loop. “It feels good to have a support system,” I texted my mentor. She texted back, “Wonderful! I’m so glad this time you had a positive and supportive experience reporting [the incident]. You deserve to be safe in your surroundings and we will continue supporting you throughout – you can count on it!”

Faculty – Reaching Out for Support

During our phone conversation, I shared my intent with Braedon to contact some of my mentors at the university to get their perspective of what could be done, if anything, within the university administration to address the incident. As a junior faculty, new to the university, I wasn’t sure to whom I should refer him. I

am fortunate to be mentored by a supportive network of Black women (and a few White faculty) in the academy, some of who are full professor or who work in key leadership positions. These mentoring relationships have been critical to my professional development and ability to build allies within and outside of the predominately White academy and field of human services. A strong mentoring network has also facilitated my determination to confront oppression, actively support and mentor students of color, and be an ally and mentor for others (Stanley, 2006). Reaching out on Braedon's behalf I uttered the words, "I need help," and diverted what might have otherwise been an isolating, and silencing experience in a predominately White university where all too often the climate, when it comes to discussions and matters of race and racism, can be minimizing and dismissed (Stanley, 2006). After I explained the incident Braedon experienced, one mentor shared a story with me about an experience in which she was walking across a street and a group of white guys yelled a racial epithet at her from their vehicle. I wondered to myself how the city police would have addressed that. She suggested that Braedon contact student affairs and the multicultural center to document his experience as a student.

In the meantime, I heard back from another mentor I reached out to by email about Braedon's experience and efforts to report it to law enforcement. "Wow! She exclaimed. "Although the city police may not consider this a racial incident it is an incident of public bullying" she wrote, and recommended that Braedon contact the fraternity chair on campus who had recently planned an upcoming daylong mandatory diversity program. Still another mentor suggested that he contact the director of students.

Saturday evening at 5:19pm I checked in on Braedon and shared the recommendations provided by my mentors. "How are you doing?" I texted. He responded, "Thank you for your communication and support. I am still frustrated, but feel much better knowing that I have a strong support system."

Student – Seeking Accountability and Justice

The president of the fraternity contacted me on that Monday around 7:30 p.m. He sounded concerned and told me that he would do all he could to find out who had done this. At the end of our conversation,

he told me that he would contact me the next day around the same time. Earlier in the day, I had contacted fraternities, but the chair was out for the day, so I left a message. I felt that I was following the appropriate procedures in order to get to the root of the problem. The following day, the chair of fraternities called me and told me that she was relieved that the president of the fraternity had contacted me and she assured me that she would stay in touch and make sure that this situation gets handled. I did not hear from the president that night around 7:30 p.m. I then contacted the chair of fraternities the following day, but once again, she was out of her office. A week passed and I had not heard from either the chair or the president of the fraternity. At this point, I was angry and very disappointed with the leadership of both of these organizations. Clearly, my safety was not important enough to get back in contact with me. I then took it upon myself and called the director of students. He was very attentive when I shared what had happened and he told me that he would handle it and he would keep me updated. The following day the director of students updated me and told me that he had reached the president and he is meeting with members of the fraternity that may have been involved in the incident. At this point, I was relieved that someone had cared enough to take action swiftly.

The director of students set up an appointment for me with a department on campus that deals with situations such as mine. When speaking with this person, I was confident that my case would be heard and action would be taken. The guys who were involved had been interviewed and clearly were identified. The person I met with told me, "at this point there isn't anything else, at a minimum, that I can do." She also disclosed her involvement with the fraternity after I stated "I feel as if I were a white woman..." she cut me off and interjected, "As a white woman, they yell provocative things at me and their alumni often times have to call me and fix things." In the back of my mind, I grew very confused. I was thinking "well as a person in power to do something about it, why do you tolerate it?" After sharing my side of what happened, she thanked me for my statement because it gave her a clearer picture of what happened. The guys involved told her that the incident occurred at night and they could not see me. This just showed me how serious they were taking the situation. Before leaving, she disclosed to me that I was lucky because my situation was not as worse as a gentleman who was cut off by a

vehicle, commented about it, and was then attacked. She basically down played my entire situation and honestly, I felt as if she was saying being Black and being discriminated against is not that bad of a situation as long as you don't get beat up.

Student – Navigating the University System – Jerked Around

Directly after my meeting, I called my mentor and elaborated on what was said in the meeting. She seemed very disturbed. She talked me through different options I could next take the process. At this point it was getting old fast because I had been in contact with many different people in different departments and I was tired of being jerked around. She was right, so I made my next call. I was literally handed off to three to four individuals who would tell me that I would need to speak to another person. Finally, one of the gentlemen that I spoke with assured me I spoke with the right person and he took my name and number and promised he would call me back. He called back and I was directed to the first person that I was originally informed to contact. Perfect! It was the same shit, she told me to share my story with the individuals who I had made contact with prior to her, and she promised she would call me back. I have not heard anything since this point and it has been a little over three weeks. I guess my situation was thrown under the "its not that bad" rug.

Faculty – Trials, Tribulations, and Triumphs

Over the course of the next nine days, I continued to do my best to guide and support Braedon as he navigated the corridors of law enforcement and academia in an effort to seek justice for the threatened attack on his personhood by the white guys in their truck. Braedon's emotions seemed to vacillate between hope and disappointment with each opened and closed door, and answered and unanswered phone call or email. Sometimes university officials he contacted were encouraging, at other times they were dismissive and insulting.

Monday morning at 9:48pm Braedon texted, "Just called fraternities. The chair is in a meeting, so they are going to contact me in a while, still have not heard from the president of the fraternity." Monday night at 7:28pm I received the text, "President of the

fraternity contacted me, said he will give me a call tomorrow. I am pretty sure he knew who the guy was but I will keep you updated." Hopeful, I responded, "That's good that he contacted you. I hope he holds the guy accountable for his behavior. Thanks for keeping me updated." Braedon texted me back, "I hope so as well because if he doesn't justice will not be served!" The fraternity president never called Braedon back and neither did the fraternities chair beyond his initial response. By Saturday at 10:12am Braedon texted, "This is getting frustrating."

I was equally frustrated and at a loss in what steps to take next. Fortunately, I received an email from another mentor and friend informing me of a call for narratives for a special issue of *Reflections*. The journal was interested in publishing narratives of actions taken to address issues of social injustice affecting the lives of Black males. While not a solution to the immediate problem, the call for narratives offered another venue for Braedon to consider in focusing his emotions productively and proactively in coping with the initial incident but also the secondary trauma (Briere & Scott, 2013) he was experiencing in trying to utilize the system to hold the men who committed the offense accountable. I emailed the call for narratives to Braedon and the journal's author guidelines suggesting that he give it some thought. I followed up with a text, "I don't expect you to do anything with this now as this article is not the priority as much as getting the case resolved in a manner that supports accountability and justice." His response was immediate, eager, and enthusiastic, "I am going to start because this is an important article! Wanting to respect his self-assessment, I responded, "Okay I trust your judgment and timing" but added, "It is good to pace yourself and continue channeling your frustration in ways that support your well being. You've been proactive and responsible every step of the way dealing with this issue and that's something you can be proud of regardless of the outcome. The process is equally as important." "Yes ma'am. I will get it taken care of one step at a time," Braedon replied. I couldn't help wondering how this whole process was affecting his ability to concentrate academically as well.

The following Monday, Braedon let me know he heard back from the director of students. I responded, "...You have done due diligence in reporting the incident with all of the authorities necessary to fully document it. It's an injustice that the burden and effort

is on you although the other guy was the aggressor and you the innocent one. However, if you ever have to deal with this kind of blatant disrespect of your life again, the record will be there for you and anyone else targeted by these guys.” Knowing of Braedon’s plans to travel, I added, “I hope you enjoy your visit with your girlfriend and your conference. What is it about?”

He emailed back, “The conference was this past weekend. It was entitled, “Black Men’s Lives Matter.” It is a program that targets 8th -12th grade Black males and discusses current issues involving them. There was a dialogue about racism within schools...what barriers do they face. Are they aware of resources? There was also a panel, which included me and other successful Black men sharing stories of our trials and barriers we have overcome and are still facing while achieving success. My cousin, who is a marketing rep for a major company is also a pastor who sparked the conference. There were about 20 young men and it was very interesting.” My heart swelled with pride for Braedon.

Student – Final Word

It should not have taken so much time and effort for action to be taken to address this issue within the university. Being a Black man in this environment has changed my perspective. My mindset went from trying to compete academically to trying to survive. It is not fair, but I hope my situation provides an example of a continued struggle for justice.

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