

ENG 180: Third Place

Guns, Paranoia, and Consequences

By Quint P. Thompson II

Allow me to begin this paper by clarifying that my education on guns and gun culture is very limited. Most of my lifetime was spent in the Bahamas where it is illegal for a citizen to own any kind of firearm. Not only is it against the law, but my parents are quite conservative Christians. I was raised on the policy that home, school, and church were the building blocks of life, and a great deal of anything not found at one of those three was not something to be involved in. Therefore, one can rightly assume that I have absolutely no background with any sort of firearm. Even the likes of nerf guns or bubble guns were forbidden in my household with a zero-tolerance policy. It was only at the age of seventeen that I could buy my very own nerf gun with which I will happily shoot anyone that challenges me. Due to these facts, there is a good chance that I may never be able to identify with ‘gun culture’ or the ‘gun personality.’ My upbringing may have a great deal to do with this conclusion. Even after we moved to the United States, I attempted to rationalize buying a gun repeatedly, but there is simply no sufficient rationale. This does not mean that I have bad vibes against gun owners or those who believe that the “gun personality” is necessary for survival. I can understand that there is some pleasure in using guns for recreational purposes or the necessity of self-preservation in certain circumstances. However, my own direct experiences with guns have all been harrowing.

My first experience with a gun in real life came while I was in the 3rd grade and happily residing in the Bahamas. I was a very active child, so being outside for hours upon end was truly no issue as long as the streetlights didn’t catch me out there. As an only child, completing my homework and chores meant I was free to do pretty much whatever I wanted. I played with my

friends for nearly every second of free time, and we would build, imagine, or create whatever our hearts desired. One of my friends was my favorite because we were the same chubby build and oddly vertically challenged. His nickname was “Telly” because he was known to sometimes be a tattletale. Rarely did we ever use his real name, which I believe was Alfred. Nonetheless, I would play at his house virtually every day except church days. It was not uncommon to build a basketball hoop with a small sheet of wood as the backboard and a used milk crate as our own NBA grade basketball apparatus. Telly and I were “training for our 4-year NBA contracts” when his uncle came outside to watch us play. Sundays are traditionally when Bahamians consume a lot of “adult beverages.” After watching us for about 5 minutes, Telly’s uncle says, “Y’all, I got a gun inside, y’all wan see it?” Of course, two little boys whose curiosities were peaked said “YEAH MAN, GO GET IT!!” He returned with what appeared to my 4’6 eyes as the largest rifle known to humanity shaped as a round version of the Capri Sun straws I bent to mimic guns. He said, “You see the right side of that board?” Needless to say, he blasted half of our backboard off and the gunshot was so loud, my mother heard it down the street and that was the last time I saw Telly. If I ever see Telly’s uncle again I will be sure to express to him the trauma that one event caused my childhood and the perception of his family in mine. I recall being grounded for three days after that incident. At the time I was not a happy camper, but I now realize my parents were simply trying to protect me from the dangers I could not see.

Speaking of dangers, I made a trip to Iowa City the weekend before last. I left at approximately 9:15 PM and arrived there around 10:15 PM. My friends and I decided that we were going to attend a house party that was a couple of minutes away from the University of Iowa campus. We went in, and there was a bunch of people who were enjoying “adult beverages.” There was one guy who was about 6’3 and 190 pounds, he seemed to be about 21 or

a junior in college. After he offered me a beverage, I asked him, “Do you go to Iowa?” he whispered, “Nah man, I’m just a junior in high school. Don’t tell anyone though.” Shortly after the shock I experienced being at a collegiate party with a sixteen-year-old, the police showed up, so my friends and I fled the scene. We found out that “Mr. Junior” was not very far behind us, so six people ended up mushing together in a five-person car. I was smart enough to call shotgun to avoid getting crammed in the backseat. We were going to park and then walk downtown but, after some shifting in the backseat, Mr. Junior says “Yoo, this Glock is loaded my guy, stop moving.” Yup, the sixteen-year-old has an unregistered Glock and after conversing with him for a little, I learned that not only does he not own a license, but he drove to the party location in an unregistered car he “found” in New Liberty. His reasoning for having the gun was because “I ain’t from here so I gotta protect myself.” How is it that simple for a sixteen-year-old to obtain an unlicensed firearm in America?

The final encounter with guns came as a national crisis: The Sandy Hook Shooting. 2012 was my very first year in the United States, and before I moved to the Midwest I lived in Georgia for a year and then in Florida for the next three. This just so happened to be the coldest day in Georgia that year and, being from the Caribbean, anything under 70 degrees felt freezing. It was approximately 30 degrees in Georgia that day and the school bus was my primary mode of transportation to and from school. On this day, I was not paying attention and I missed the call for my bus. My phone died, so I had to walk about two or three miles to the community where my aunt lived. I had the proper regalia so I would not “die of hypothermia,” as my mother bluntly put it. I only noticed that there were not a lot of buses on the street while I was walking home. When I opened the garage door, I went straight to my room to drop off my stuff and to empty my cupboard. The next thing I felt was an odd wave of both frustration and sadness from

my mom with tears in her eyes. Usually she is very soft spoken, but she was screaming at the top of her lungs: “PY WHERE WERE YOU? WHY DIDN’T YOU CALL ME? IT’S 30 DEGREES OUTSIDE. THEY SHOOTIN UP THE SCHOOLS!” I was completely confused until hours later when I discovered that Adam Lanza went to Sandy Hook Elementary in Connecticut and shot and killed twenty children and six adults including his own mother. I vividly recall this shooting. The tears my mother shed on my shoulder cannot be forgotten. Anything before that moment is foggy, but after that moment I am wide awake to the dangers involving in simply living.

Guns are seen as a part of one’s identity rather than a deadly tool and are worshipped by white conservative males in the name of freedom, liberty, and patriotism. There was a good chance that the gun which was in the waist of that sixteen-year-old could’ve gone off and hurt any one of my friends. Telly’s uncle could have aimed just a little to the right and taken my head off with the backboard. Unless we want to continue to enjoy results like that of Sandy Hook, Columbine, or Marjory Stoneman Douglas, something must be done. “Even though I want us to be protected, I can’t escape the fact that these are the same guns that are oppressing communities of color in our state,” says Johnathan Metzler in his book, *Dying of Whiteness*. I have a hypothesis with regards to the perspective of “the conservative white voter.” After speaking to and accidentally befriending people like this sixteen-year-old at a random Iowa City party, I’m beginning to understand this perspective is simply one of fear. The fears of others attacking brings guns just as the fear of failure brings hard work. The fear of change brings out their conservative views when it comes to progressive movements or other opinionated groups. The media, the people surrounding them, and their upbringing, ultimately create the theme of fear in far-right opinions.

Johnathan Metzl very clearly eludes to the idea of finding a solution to both the suicide epidemic (85 percent being among white males) and mass shootings. The United States leads the rest of Earth in both suicide and mass shootings by a disgusting margin. Regardless of whether these weapons are used to show off, for protection, or for disgraceful acts as school shootings, something must be done. Our one goal as a nation should be to resolve the issues guns can create and have already created. This is not tomorrow's problem. We must solve these issues immediately. Any time peoples' lives are at risk there should be immediate attention given. Obviously I am just a freshman in college with little to no power, but I would like to do what I can to see the ending of mass shootings. I don't have the solutions to the problems we face, but as the oldest child in my family I must leave a legacy for generations to come, which is impossible from the grave.