

Wednesday, March 18

Heads of the Colored People – *Nafissa Thompson-Spires*

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Friday, March 20

I Am a Big Black Man Who Will Never Own a Gun

Because I Know I Would Use It

On history, race, and guns in America

by Kiese Laymon

I

m wondering, while sitting on a sturdy porch across the road from William Faulkner's house in northern Mississippi, if President Trump and the Mississippi Legislature really want big black niggers like me to carry guns into our classrooms. As a black child from central Mississippi, I was encouraged by my mother and teachers to imitate the work of William Faulkner. Mama thought imitating Faulkner could protect me, ironically, from white men, white men's power, and all men's bullets. By the time I was 15, I'd read everything Faulkner had written. I knew *my* Faulkner like I knew *my* Ice Cube, *my* Voltron, *my* En Vogue, *my* Good Times, *my* banana-flavored Now and Later. I loved knowing that Faulkner's literary virtuosity was inflected by his real and imagined experiences with black Mississippians. Somewhere around 11th grade, though, my body tired of imitating white writers who simply could not see, hear, love, or imagine black folk as part of, or central to, their audience. I especially tired of white writers from Mississippi who, in my

estimation, had enough deeply Southern home-training and proximity to the ways of black folk to know—and be—better.

When Callie Barr, a black woman paid to clean up after the Faulkner family, died in 1940, Faulkner delivered her eulogy. He said, “From her I learned to tell the truth, to refrain from waste, to be considerate of the weak and respectful to age. I saw fidelity to a family which was not hers, devotion and love for people she had not borne.”

Of course, black fidelity and devotion to white families that are not our own are a terrifying part of our story in this nation. And, of course, there was a lot Faulkner could not see in Callie Barr’s work because white Americans, regardless of region, often have no clue about the shape of stories told and the depth of truth concealed under the timbre of our voices and the greased creases of our smiles. Still, I always believed that Faulkner’s lessons learned from Callie Barr’s supposed devotion and fidelity were foundational to any national or individual reckoning with American violence.

Tell the truth.

Refrain from waste.

Consider the weak.

Respect age.

Like my grandmother, Callie Barr spent most of her life cleaning up after white folk. Unlike Callie Barr, Grandmama never lived near the houses of the white families she took care of. The house where Callie Barr and her family lived is directly behind Faulkner’s house. From the front of Barr’s porch, one looks directly into the back of Faulkner’s home. The porch of Barr’s

house, held up by weakened concrete, has one screen door in the middle and two windows on either side. The porch is worn and wobbly, just like the porch I grew up on in Forest, Mississippi. Unlike Callie Barr, my family did not have to look at anything white-owned from our porch. We did not own much, but we owned our shotgun house. We owned our porch. We owned our small swath of land. We owned our garden, our Bibles, our books, our cinder blocks, our pecan trees, our sticker bushes.

And we owned our shotguns.

Those shotguns, and the stories surrounding those shotguns, always reminded me that my black, deeply Southern family had neither devotion nor fidelity to white folk who could not see us. White folk who could not see us, sometimes led by police, often led by presidents and public policy, had no problems finding creative ways to encourage our death, destruction, and suffering. They could not see us, but they could always see our guns, whether the guns existed or not. These white folk had no devotion, no fidelity to us, and little love for themselves. Still, as good Christians, we often prayed for them and said things like, “Bless their heart, Lord, because they know not what they do.” But if they ever knew not what they did on our property, near our porch, against the bodies of our family, they were going to get shot. Or shot at.

This is not a metaphor.

I’ve walked to Callie Barr’s porch every day this month, looking and really listening for something. Last night, I think I heard it. After grown white men with no devotion or fidelity to Emmett Till tortured and shot him in the head 75 miles from where I live, Faulkner wrote, “If we in America have reached that point in our desperate culture when we must murder children, no matter for what reason or what color, we don’t deserve to survive, and probably won’t.”

If William Faulkner loved, or at least imagined what Callie Barr saw happening to her children, what her children saw happening to her, or even what Barr and her children saw happening to the Faulkner family, he could never say, “If we in America have reached that point in our desperate culture when we must murder children....” Faulkner would have known that you cannot love any child in the United States of America if you refuse to accept that this nation was born of a maniacal commitment to the death, destruction, and suffering of black, brown, and indigenous children and a moral annihilation of white children. Faulkner would have accepted that there has never been a time in this desperate nation’s history when American grown folk have refused to murder children.

This is not breaking news.

This is not a deep reading of our nation’s habits.

This is not a progressive or remotely radical reading of our nation.

This is wholly descriptive.

This is why Donald Trump is president, why black men are 13 times more likely to be shot and killed with guns in this country, why a nation that parades its big guns thinks it has the moral authority to audaciously tell its children and its black folk what to do with their little guns. This is why we talk so much about the stock market and so little about income inequality; why mass incarceration, mass evictions, mass sexual violence, and mass shootings are American specialties; why 17 people were killed in a Parkland, Florida, school last month; why Stephon Clark was shot 20 times in his grandmama’s backyard; why thousands of children will die before summer and hundreds of thousands more cannot afford healthy breakfasts, lunches, and dinners; why we are a nation of addicts quick to diagnose other

people's addictions; why so many of us long to be skinnier but not healthier; why we are obsessed with forgetting what we don't want to be true; why we never admit that we are really good at violence because schools, churches, politicians, and parents taught us to be really good at violence; why Donald Trump — the worst of men, the worst of white folk, and the worst of Christians — has encouraged some teachers to come to school armed; and why the Mississippi House of Representatives just passed House Bill 1083, which would presumably allow big black teachers like me to carry guns into our classrooms.

All in the name of safety.

And order.

And freedom.

And love.

This, and the fact that America has always been a desperate culture where grown Americans encourage and sanction the murder and suffering of its children, make me afraid to ever own or handle a gun. I know I'd use it. I am a big black man who does not have children partially because I know I'd have to get a gun. I'd have to get a gun if I had children because I have been taught that guns are how men—big and small, black, Latinx, and white—protect their children from violence in America.

As a child, my grandmama used a gun. My mama used a gun. For a while, as a teenager, I used a gun. I stopped using guns when I realized that the way we make boys, men, fathers, presidents, and guns in this nation is the violence. The way we never really have honest conversations about what bullets, poverty, anti-blackness, cis-heteropatriarchy, and negligence do to unruly, vulnerable bodies is the violence. The way we never

reckon with what bullets, poverty, anti-blackness, cis-heteropatriarchy, and systemic negligence do to the insides of powerful white bodies is the violence. And sadly, these kinds of violence leave messes that black and brown women and girls usually have to clean up.

If we really wanted a less violent nation, we would welcome as many vulnerable folk as possible into this country. We would commit to a living wage. We would stop scapegoating undocumented immigrants and start dealing with how much pleasure we derive from violently keeping immigrants of color out of a country built, strangely, by immigrants of color, indigenous peoples, and stolen black folk. We would commit to a national seven-to-one student-teacher ratio in K-12. We would commit the most money to schools in this country's poorest communities. We would demand not metal detectors, but comprehensive courses in sexual violence, domestic violence, gun violence, and economic inequality in all our schools. We would have substantial conversations about disarming police, abolishing prisons, and providing robust universal mental health care for every child in the nation. We would call American foreign and domestic policy "American terror" and our criminal-minded president a "democratically elected white Christian American terrorist." We would be honest about how America encourages us to lie, manipulate, harm ourselves, and coat our emotional and bodily cracks before tracing those cracks to their origins. If we want this nation to be less violent, white folk have to show a devotion and fidelity to black folk; men have to show a devotion and fidelity to women; cis-het folk have to show a devotion and fidelity to trans folk, gender-nonconforming folk, and queer folk; grown folk have to show a devotion and fidelity to children; wealthy folk have to show a devotion and fidelity to folk living in poverty. If we really wanted to make this country less violent, we would tell the truth.

The truth is that we can love our children better than we have. We can resist. We can organize. We can be led by our children. But the truth, in this country, is that we do not love our children enough to divest from violence. We have not loved children enough in this country to change our relationships to violence. But we can. If we bring this truth into every space we enter, every space we long to bring a gun (and all the other less spectacular but equally brutal forms of violence we tote daily in our heart and heads), our children will not be safe, but they will eventually be safer and far less addicted to violence than we are.

I know y'all don't hear me, though.

Friday afternoons in Oxford, there is a lot of traffic going by my house on the way to William Faulkner's home. I often imagine what Callie Barr and William Faulkner would think about the country that made an outwardly racist, sexist, less than mediocre, violent white reality-TV star king because he was an outwardly racist, sexist, less than mediocre, violent white reality-TV star. I assume they both would say, in their own ways, "Ain't no surprise when violence do as violence does."

The relationship between William Faulkner and Callie Barr means more to me than it should. I am that goofy, that Southern. I want to view the relationship cynically, but I know Callie Barr made William Faulkner's most dazzling narrative interventions possible. And I assume William Faulkner made parts of Callie Barr less vulnerable, more materially secure, and possibly even joyful. But white folk will find no fidelity or devotion to a family that is not mine in my body, work, or imagination, especially when that devotion often comes at the expense of our own families, our own bodies, our own health. That, like guns, is a kind of violence I must divest from.

I wonder every day if my grandmama, my mama, my friends will find invisible guns next to my big black bullet-riddled body. I wonder who I'm really protecting by never, ever buying or borrowing a gun. If white folk and their police walk up on the Oxford, Mississippi, porch where I'm finishing this essay and say they found what looked like a gun in the pocket of my sweatpants, please know they are lying. If they tell you they found what looked like a gun in the glove compartment of my Prius, please know they are lying. If they tell you that I used a gun to harm myself, please know they are lying. If they say they saw what looked like a gun in between my big thick thighs, under one of my belly rolls, or sticking out the crack of my juicy black ass, please know they are doing what they do best.

They are lying.

My phone, my wallet, my remote control, my stuffed black squirrel, my burnt black toast, the black wave brush I use on my nappy beard look nothing like guns. But I, like many of you, look absolutely like a big black nigger. And as long as this nation believes in big black niggers and as long as the phrase "becoming a man" is still a thing, no one should own or use a gun. Big black niggers are not allowed to be "quiet" or "shy." Big black niggers will never have our gun violence asterisked by the fact that we were "dealing with personal challenges." Big black niggers are guns to the most violent powerful parts of our country. Being treated like a gun and a big black nigger makes me want to shoot back. Wanting to perpetually shoot back makes me know I will never ever own a gun.

Please know, and remember, no matter what they tell you, that in America I am a big black man, a big black teacher, a big black writer, a big black son, a big black nigger who does not own a gun because I know I will use it. Please know, and remember, no matter what they tell you, that I will use it because that's what I have been trained to do in this country. Please know, and remember, no matter what they tell you, that we will never dent

any kind of violence in this country until we tell the truth about why we derive so much pleasure from so many different kinds of violences.

I am a big black nigger who does not own a gun because I know I will use it. I am a big black teacher who will never bring a gun into a classroom because I will use it. I am a deeply Southern black American man who is afraid to tell the truth, afraid to change, afraid to tenderly love myself, my country, and our children. Do you care enough about the children of this country to begin divesting from all forms of American violence? Guns, as quiet as it's kept, are actually the easiest part.