

The Revolution Will Be Revised

SEAN ENFIELD

On July 7, 2016, even though I'd spent the day teaching teenagers for eight long hours, I planned to attend a Black Lives Matter rally in Dallas, Texas. The demonstration was being held for Alton Sterling and Philando Castille, who had both been murdered by police that same week—Sterling on Tuesday in Baton Rouge and Castille on Wednesday in a small Minnesotan suburb. Traditional media and social media, alike, replayed their deaths repeatedly, asking what these recent murders meant for a country reeling from similar losses every other week. Like many others, I posted their names that morning, accompanied by a jazz tune. Ambrose Akinmusire's "Rollcall for Those Absent" attempted to chronicle the names of Black lives stolen by law enforcement.



That night, however, the rally turned into a nightmare after a sniper shot and killed five police officers during the demonstration. But I had missed it all. I had crashed on the couch after teaching, and so I was 40 miles away, scrolling through the chaos from the safety of my living room.

Two days later, local poet Joe Milazzo posted an open call for “Dallas writes [sic] and artists who work in the medium of language” to respond to the tragedy. A minute later, he edited the post to add the missing “r” in “writers” (communicating in the digital age is an ongoing spectacle of revision). Milazzo asked for pieces that explored the range of emotional responses to the shooting—“rage, confusion, sorrow, resolve, feelings that any artistic response is still a matter of ‘too soon.’” I set to work. After reading Joe’s call, I composed a jumbled mess of an essay on an old typewriter I’d bought to help my revision process. I liked to start with the old-fashioned, steadfast method of writing required by the typewriter, rather than the start-stop writing allowed by the computer. That afternoon, the typewriter sat heavy on my desk, the clatter of letters depressing upon ribbon then page in quick, busy succession. Hours later, I transferred that manic first draft to my laptop, revising as I retyped, and sent it off with no further revision.

You are present at tonight’s protest if not physically then at least spiritually, my essay, “From the Sidelines,” originally began. “Sidelines,” because I was unsure of how I fit into the narrative of the violence that befell Dallas. Often, I’ve dreamed of revolution. I read all about the Black radicals of yesteryear,¹ how they risked their bodies in pursuit of an America that might someday stop leaving them dead on the concrete, but while I was friends with many activists, I could never claim the same title. I only read about activists.² At the time, I taught for both a prep school and a summer program called Upward Bound, both just north of Dallas, and teaching had burdened me with semblances of responsibility I’ve never known how to parse. On Tuesday and Thursday mornings, I taught middle-schoolers at the prep school how to write the five-paragraph essay, and then, in the afternoon, I would zip further northbound to teach poetry to the low-income high-schoolers serviced by Upward Bound. Often, I was late. Always, I came home exhausted and collapsed into a stupefied, restless sleep.

Indeed, you could have been there, would have been there, were it not for a mid-day nap, I wrote in summation. Second-person point of view granted me distance, and distance illustrated my noninvolvement in the tragedy itself.

Maybe I hoped to identify myself with other educators who had planned to exercise their right to protest but couldn't muster the energy to drive an hour southbound into the heavily trafficked city. At the prep school, I had my own classroom, which I was sprucing up during summer school in anticipation of the upcoming school year. My students were Muslim, many with family still in Pakistan, and so I had planned to teach *I Am Malala*. That summer, I hung a poster with a quote from Malala Yousafzai that read, "One Child, One Teacher, One Book, One Pen Can Change the World." That poster is now crumpled, torn, lying in a closet in Dallas somewhere. Maybe that's why I want to tell the story straight now, ditch the "you" for the "I," and see just how thin the line between witness and agent is. As for the story itself, I can't revise the facts. I can't edit it as I could a Facebook post, even these three years removed. I'd still nap that evening, and I don't know whether I'll ever understand what that says about me.

The best-laid plans, however, are often thwarted by teenagers. Before coming home that evening, I argued with a seventh grader about why he needed to write a response on the seven wonders of the world if he'd never seen any of them.³ He sipped from the mug of tea he always kept handy. His mother was the principal and owner of the school, and so even though he wasn't allowed entry, he would still brew himself a cup in the Teachers' Lounge⁴ before my class. I reminded him, "You're not supposed to go into the Teachers' Lounge."

"But it's already made!" he reminded me in turn, and indeed, I have never been one to waste any caffeinated beverage, so I let it slide.

"You still have to write about the seven wonders, though."

Already fatigued by circuitous disputes with middle-schoolers, I withered even more that afternoon as a class of high-schoolers expressed disgust at my ignorance of a rapper named G-Eazy⁵ and at my "old" music tastes.

"Do you mean Young Jeezy?" I asked. "GZA, maybe?"

At the prep school, I was closer to my students' age than all but one of my fellow teachers and faculty, and yet I certainly couldn't align myself with the students. They, too, loved G-Eazy. At Upward Bound, I was closer to the middle in the range of faculty ages, but there still lingered that burden of responsibility. I was an adult; my job was to be old, distant. I didn't meditate on that emotional toll most days and likely didn't that Thursday. I had to go to work, after all, but the lived experience was still that the navigation of responsibility left my back bent, my eyelids heavy.

Now, it feels as if I'm still excusing myself for my absence—as many a student has done—but all this is to say, I slept and slept hard as those officers were shot and my friends hid from the gunfire.

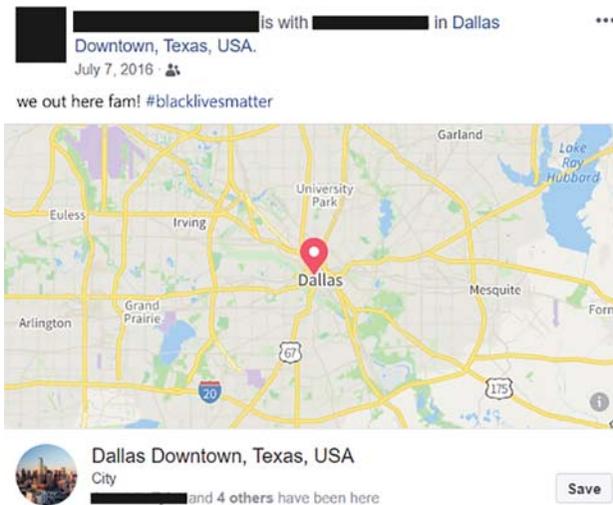
I woke up that evening around 7:00 p.m., however, thinking I might still make the demonstration. *Your first thought*, I wrote, “*I’m late.*” Eventually, I realized, *[My] third thought*, “*It’s too late.*” The gunfire hadn’t yet begun. My living room was gray with natural light, and drool shone on the red leather couch in its center. On the wall hung a painting of a drowning man—silhouetted starkly black and submerged deep in the water, arms outstretched for help. A friend painted it some time ago. At first, I admired the piece for the evocative use of a cool, calming blue for such a suffocating scene. As my first year of teaching progressed, I identified with the piece on a more personal level. Expectations—both self-imposed and beyond me—seemed to tunnel over me like waves, and when I reached out, I grasped at the cold presence of nothing. My classroom desk provided the most useful metaphor for this drowning, covered as it was in ungraded essays stacked high and disciplinary referrals unfiled. That year, I gave out A’s to at least ten papers lost in the mess. That year, a student asked me why they had to keep their desk so clean if I couldn’t do the same with mine. My principal, too, often remarked about the desk, namely, that I needed to keep it cleaner, way cleaner. That year, the leg of my desk snapped and collapsed—because it was old, I reasoned, but surely the weight hadn’t helped.

The Black Lives Matter demonstration, I hoped, would help me reclaim some sense of agency. I would learn from that community of activists; I would be motivated by like-minded friends among whom I could better understand my role. I could see firsthand the agents of change, could count myself as a part of their ranks, but the water proved too deep. I couldn’t keep swimming after another long day of what felt like treading water. Instead, I scrolled along with friends I knew were there, in solidarity with the solidarity movement. In the original version of this essay, I confessed that I used the word “*solidarity*” because to call it voyeurism still feels both wrong and right simultaneously. This, I still feel. As I am both educator and writer, the slope separating solidarity and voyeurism resists easy traction. Always, I occupy a space outside activism. Wherever I go, distance. “Witness,” I offer as explanation. The question remains, then, how meaningful is my gaze—if at all? Still, I wrote that *it will always do [my] heart good to see black bodies*

mobilized. Even if [I'm] not among them. Even though, in my half-blackness, [I] feel like [I've] never been. This, too, I still feel.

Pictures of friends chanting, marching, and, as would be widely dispersed in the days to come, hugging the police officers⁶ cluttered my newsfeed that evening. Invariably, my pop-culture-addled mind recalled Beyoncé at the Super Bowl just a few months before, decked out in the uniform of Black militancy, commanding Black women to get in formation. *The revolution will, indeed, be televised.* Though, now, I can't say for certain what revolution looks like. *What it demands of its participants, its recipients, its onlookers, and all shades of grey in between.*

A friend posted,



I was among seven likes. *The revolution, it seems, will be live-tweeted.*

From a minimized live-stream, I heard the first gunshot. Before then, I found that the chanting and marching and blowing wind and chirping birds all blurred into a soothing static. When I returned to the stream, I saw how quickly events can turn sour. The stream was like watching *Wizard of Oz* in reverse. *What was once colorful, in all connotations of the word, turned lamentably and frighteningly black and white.*

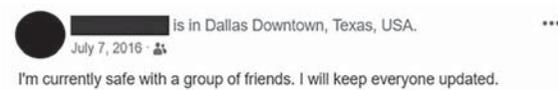
My feed was rampant with confusion, anxiety, speculation. Every now and then, someone updated the death toll.

A relative, on the white side, posted,



I did not like this post, and so I could not count how many I was among. Months later, that same relative would send me a long, one-paragraph message, relaying the “poor white woman’s perspective on black lives matter.” I left her message unread and deleted it without a second thought. My white relatives often had “thoughts” on these matters. I ignored them just as often.

Meanwhile, others updated their status to show that they’d found safety:

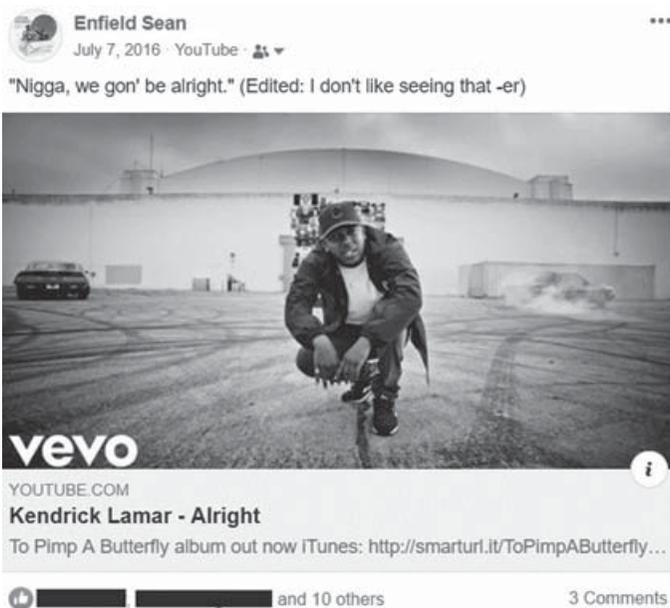


While those of us on the sidelines offered our commentary:

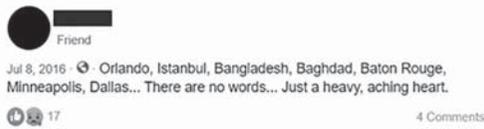


More than anything, safety was the refrain of the night. Most of us posting, of course, couldn't have been safer at our keyboards, though the violence felt so close. Our city seemed on fire.

I was not there, and yet I didn't sleep. Part of me desperately hoped the shooter wasn't Black. Please be one of those white-bred, white-bread terrorists. Of course, I wanted to keep track of my friends, but I also wanted to know something that I couldn't then articulate. *You need to know. You just don't know what it is you need to know*, I wrote in the aftermath, but I was just embarrassed by what I needed to know—would everything be all right? That thought, however, seemed too cliché to be worthwhile, so it got bottled up into second person too and disassociated. In times of turmoil, it can be easy to doubt our impulses. It can be easy for the revision-obsessed witness to hope that something deeper might emerge from casting aside the first thought, but with friends hiding in hotel lobbies, unsure whether the gunfire had stopped, I just hoped everything would be all right, and so I scrolled onward, no longer in solidarity but with a fear that felt unearned. Throughout the night, I wondered, "Might this be the face of revolution?" But I left that question in my head, unposted. Late in the night, I joined the choir of sideline participants, looking toward the future, and then revising that too:



Many of us would wake in the morning and lament the lost and what the violence might mean:



Even Ashton Kutcher chimed in:



That next morning, July 8th, my alarm went off, and I put my phone away. I prepared for the school day. I checked only the news, only that morning. *The deaths had plateaued at five, that crooked snake of a prime number, and as [I] learned listening to NPR's Morning Edition that morning, the number did not include the gunman,⁷ who, in the early morning while [I] scrolled and scrolled, was killed by an explosive delivered by a remote-controlled robot. [I] can't help but envision that machine as Johnny 5. Oh brave new world.* The remote explosive device was the first of its kind to be utilized by a domestic but militarized police force. The blue lives struck back with resound. I wonder how they reacted, with all that space between them and the terminated target—how cold did that intervening air feel? The gunman's face and name were shared across traditional and social media alike, each with their own take on his motives and actions:



But I stayed off my phone for much of the day, not wanting to feel distant from the events of the previous night.

The principal appeared relieved to see me when I arrived. She said that she felt compelled to check on me.

“I wasn’t there,” I said.

“What’s happening to our country?” she asked. A common refrain in turbulent times.

She meant the violence of the gunman, but my first thought was the exploding robot that undoubtedly turned him into chunks of meat and tissue and blood. My mind swirls with answers. This is the condition of American Blackness. Just a year before, in the heat of the Black Lives Matter movement and following the murders of two police officers in the state, Texas Lt. Governor Dan Patrick told an interviewer, “All lives do matter and particularly law enforcement” and that “there [was] a war on police.” That was his answer to what was happening in the country. Another answer is that there has always been a war on Black bodies, though the police once used water hoses in this fight. Now, they arrive to protests in riot gear, armed like soldiers in wait.

Typically, we’ve taken it in stride. See Martin Luther King Jr. standing at the pulpit, preaching a radical but nonviolent gospel. Others have proposed more radical, violent approaches. See the image of Malcolm X peering out his window with an assault rifle. Ignore the photo of these two men half-smiling at one another in their one and only meeting, shortly before both were assassinated.⁸ To be Black in America is to accept the Martin-to-Malcolm spectrum as the only avenues for change, and no matter which you choose, you’ve chosen wrong. Martin’s nonviolent gaze, in fact, is often used by white America to belittle Black folks deemed unworthy. Ten days after the shooting, my “poor white woman” aunt posted,



disregarding King’s more radical, revolutionary dreams.

Sam Cooke once sang, “A change is gonna come,” but that change seems trapped in the famous orchestra swell that opens the song. Cooke, eventually, was shot dead. And so, rather than choose, the Black American occupies a lull that stretches onward like a phone line gone dead. See Dallas Police Chief David Brown—a Black man—behind a podium with his back turned to his fellow officers and facing the press in the aftermath of July 7’s shooting. He held back tears. His speech lay before him, but he appeared to have no words. Eventually, he remarked, “All I know is that this must stop, this divisiveness between our police and our citizens,” echoing the lieutenant governor’s “war on police” though he stopped short of declaring war. A few months later, he’d retire, providing no reason for the end of his tenure, but it’s hard not to relate it back to that moment. He would be replaced by Renee Hall—a Black woman from Detroit who was the first woman to ever hold this position. Progress, some undoubtedly said, as they might’ve once said about Chief Brown when he assumed the position in 2010.

What’s happening to our country? The principal’s question was rhetorical, and yet she still sought, if not an answer, a reply.

“Strange times,” I responded and headed to class. Not having slept, I walked through a dream, the hallways rendering before me with each footstep. My first student, the principal’s son whom I tutored one-on-one in the mornings, asked whether I heard about the violence, and my impulse was to ask, Which? He walked in late, sneaking out of the Teachers’ Lounge. As always, he had a mug of tea in hand, a light haze of steam swirling around his fingertips, and I blinked a silent stare in response. *Here was a chance. Ground-level revolution, a chance to get into formation.* Instead, I said that, yes, I had heard all about it on the news. *Stumbling over just about every syllable,* I transitioned into a lesson on gerund phrases. “You know, you’re not supposed to go into the teachers’ lounge,” I reminded, business as usual. As an educator, it can be hard sometimes to know when it is appropriate to go off script. To just be yourself. To attempt a lesson, perhaps, that feels truer to the moment, and so I often stuck to the script, too afraid to revise. The gerund phrases, after all, were what the textbook dictated he needed to know about that day. In that first year, especially, I couldn’t quite figure out what my responsibility was, but I knew I’d stay out of trouble if my students were passing.

“One Child, One Teacher, One Book, One Pen Can Change the World,” but *that change seemed so unlikely and so beyond those bleacher kids, scrolling*

on the sidelines. Or, so I concluded three years ago. God knows what kind of conclusions I might reach in three, five, ten, twenty-five more years.

Now, I'm not so sure I know what a formal education can change. I still write. I still teach. I still hope that those tasks have set in motion some force we might call "change."

But I also write this after an off-duty police officer received only ten years prison time for shooting a Black man, Botham Jean, in his own south Dallas apartment. She claimed to have mistaken it for her own. Throughout the trial, Amber Guyger, the murderer, seemed unrepentant. She seemed upset only that the system built to protect her might fail this time. On the stand, she told the jury, "I wish he had killed me." In other words, I wish the Black man had filled his role instead—her own attempt at revision. Just a week after her conviction, Joshua Brown, Jean's neighbor and a key witness during the trial, was also shot—someone else's attempt at revision. Assistant Police Chief Avery Moore⁹ informed the media that they suspected Brown's murder to be a drug deal gone wrong, arresting three Black men as proof and calling into question Brown's character in the process—an institution's revision. But the story so far, the image shared in the aftermath, is not about violence but about Jean's brother embracing Guyger after her sentencing. She cried on his shoulder; he offered her forgiveness. Once again, violence taken in stride.

In a press conference after the sentencing, Police Chief Renee Hall urged the populace that "that's the spirit with which, I believe, we want to move forward." She meant the spirit of the embrace, of grace extended to the murderer. And while I don't want further violence, I don't want further capitulation to violence either. That would be the wrong kind of revision. Give me instead "Jeshia Evans Taking a Stand in Baton Rouge"¹⁰—a flower outstretched to a retreating SWAT team. Neither embrace nor violence, but a Black woman asserting her position, her right to hold beauty out in the presence of an army. Some might, like Guyger, wonder how events might've gone differently, but time doesn't allow for such revisions, though our institutions want us to believe that we've amassed some sort of change. But I write this in the year in which two Black trans women, Muhlaysia Booker and Chynal Lindsey, were murdered in the same Dallas that the Police Department wants me to believe has changed, and 17 more were murdered nationwide. "Dallas today is different than it was yesterday," Chief Hall claimed in the same press conference, but I don't know what shape that change has taken,

if any at all. Because I write this just weeks after a Black woman, Atatiana Jefferson, was shot in her own home by a white male cop called to check on her welfare. She lived in Fort Worth, about an hour west of Dallas. Her door was left open, and a concerned neighbor phoned the police, and for this, she was murdered. Jefferson's eight-year-old nephew sat nearby; they had been enjoying a late night playing video games before his aunt went to check on a noise emanating from the bushes. "A prowler," she might've thought, before the world turned paranoid, dark, violent at the hand of one sworn to serve and protect. Truthfully, I could write this in any month or year and add a name to the roll call—this, too, is revision.

Revision, too, might be the demonstrations held in honor of these stricken Black souls in which protestors take to revising their city with broken windows and emptied-out shopping centers. "Riots," the conservative Right and so-called moderate Left label it, but a riot is destruction for, say, a sports championship. Revolution, however, demands such revision. This country was built and still prospers on the economic exploitation of Black and Brown people, and so the aggrieved set fire to the temples of capital in hopes that their grievances might finally be heard and lead to demonstrative change. The problem, then, is not the destruction but how to sustain the spirit of that destruction so that those racist institutions are as readily dismantled as a looted Target.

Perhaps then, our newsfeeds would no longer be revised with new names and new videos of stolen Black bodies. I don't know how or if it helps for the social media activists to add their commentary to violence witnessed from however far away, but I, too, have felt powerless in the wake of tragedy and exercised the voice at my fingertips to relieve that feeling. Nevertheless, I try not to post so immediately these days. I don't begrudge others sharing their initial reactions. It can be medicinal, this release, and others navigate it better. Their thoughts better composed in formation. Looking back, however, I can see the way I hide behind first impressions. Yelling into the void provides immediate relief but lacks the meditation that better suits mourning a tragedy. It creates distance, as if to say I've released this tragedy from my thoughts, when we are all—if we tracked it well enough—intimately connected to the violence on the home front and could better heal if we stopped scrolling and embraced that fact.

There are no sidelines. Especially if you're Black. Wherever you step is the field, and the ball is always in motion, and the whistle won't blow until

the final bell sounds. All we can do is give our words agency. I have tried that here, tried to give my original essay the movement that might've brought me closer to how that hometown tragedy complicated my vision of revolution and how it made me rethink my role as a teacher. If we falter, then maybe God might grant us the chance for revision. Maybe that might bring us closer to revolution. I taught poetry again the following summer, in 2017, and my class was invited to perform spoken word accompanied by a visiting jazz band. The students went up one by one and stammered through their poems as the band improvised a tune behind them. When they finished, the band leader would look them in the eye and shout, "One mo' gin! From the top!" The room was dark; the stage, bright and colorful. From the students' vantage point, they likely couldn't see our waiting eyes, but when their nerves subsided and they began their second (sometimes third) run-throughs, the crowd would rise and clap and hoot and holler for the impassioned revision. If they couldn't see us, they could certainly hear us. I've never written an easier lesson than the one that followed that night—revise, revise, revise.

I can't revise the facts of that July morning, however, with the news of the previous night weighing so present and fatal and close. I keep revisiting this memory, and the essay I attempted to make of it, because I wish I could revise, revise, revise that encounter with my student. But instead, I must hold out this desire like a flower and hope that with new understandings I might make my witnessing meaningful, might make my voyeurism solidarity, might make my revision revolutionary. If I could revise one moment that morning, I would ask my student, simply, how he felt. He often asked me about current events, and I often punted, believing it wasn't my place. The news was bad in 2016, especially for minorities like us, but that story is as old as this country. We learn to take the tragedies in stride. What we don't learn is how to help others through.

Over the course of that year, that student had asked me about each stricken Black body, about the Pulse shootings, and about every vile word that escaped then-candidate Trump's mouth. His tenacity, which he brought to refuting assignments and brewing tea in the forbidden Teachers' Lounge, commanded his voice whenever he discussed the news. "That's not real Islam," he insisted after the Pulse nightclub shooting, in which a radicalized gunman, pledging allegiance to ISIS, attacked a queer night club during its regular Latin Night festivities. He needed to assert that the terrorist did not

share his ideology; needed to refute the violence perpetrated, supposedly in the name of a shared God; and needed me to know he wanted something different, better, peaceful. I nodded solemnly. A month later, I'd feel the same about a gunman who bore a passing resemblance¹¹ to me and to an ideology with which I identified. My classroom was small. My desk fit squarely against the back row of student desks, and during our tutoring sessions, the student sat in the chair nearest mine. On the opposing wall, the Malala poster hung. Maybe, in our discussion, I would've pointed to it. I would've asked him what he thought about the idea of change. She was nearer his age than I, from Pakistan where the student had relatives, and standing at the precipice of revolution. Violence struck her as close as violence could. She was shot in the face for asserting her right to literacy and education. She did not capitulate; she did not retaliate. Instead, after she healed, she stood up again. She wrote out her vision of revolution and how she thought the world might someday look if more young girls were taught the same. Writing this now, I wish I could tell you what shape my student thought the world might someday take. I wish I had asked him. If I could revise this essay how I wanted, I would end on those words—whatever they might be.

NOTES

This piece is adapted from “From the Sidelines” by Sean Enfield, collected in “City of _____: Dispatches from 16 Dallas Poets” for *Entropy*, published in July 2016.

1. That summer, I was reading Assata Shakur's autobiography, and the news always struck me with uncanny, unsettling déjà vu. My Facebook newsfeed, in fact, must have in some way resembled the news relayed to her as she sat in prison for a crime she didn't commit—news of kinfolk murdered for being Black in the wrong place at the wrong time.
2. James Baldwin, in an unfinished manuscript posthumously adapted into the documentary *I Am Not Your Negro*, chronicles the lives and assassinations of activists—Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, and Medgar Evers. Though he admires each in their own way and refers to them as friends, he cannot count himself among them. He was not there on the picket lines. He was not present at the marches. He did not serve food with the NAACP or the Panthers. Instead, he calls himself “Witness.” Perhaps because Baldwin, who's long been an inspiration to me, once claimed it, Witness is how I identify too.

3. To his credit, I didn't think he needed to. Nonetheless, the textbook assigned to us both—to me by the principal and to him by, well, me—wanted him to, forcing me into the dreaded, decisively unradical reasoning of “Because I said so.”
4. The Teachers' Lounge was a kitchenette, slightly larger than a walk-in closet, but as one might call their cubicle an “office,” we called our closet-kitchen a “lounge.” All students, even those born to the woman in charge, were not permitted into this small but sacred space.
5. I have since listened to the white rapper they were referring to and was thoroughly unimpressed.
6. Many on social media shared these photographs as evidence of some brand of #alllivesmatter unity, a call to end the divisiveness that they believed led to that evening's tragedy.
7. Regrettably, Black and thus labeled a terrorist. His name was Micah Xavier Johnson, and in the most common picture shared in the shooting's aftermath, he is dressed in African regalia, staring into the camera, with one “Black power” fist raised. This is the man many white Americans likely envision when they think “Black Lives Matters protestor,” though he lurked on the outside of the movement—a lone gunman. There's another image of him, in his U.S. army uniform, in which he stares blankly at the camera. He served in Afghanistan; maybe he was radicalized then. It's hard not to connect his military service to his elevated position, his assault rifle, his calculated attack. Maybe he was radicalized watching the bodies of Black men pile up on the pavement every night on the evening news. He reportedly told police during the final standoff that “he was upset about the recent police shootings . . . he was upset at white people.” Indeed, his aunt confirmed, “I think a person can only take so much.” Maybe it was a combination of the two. He might've watched the news and believed himself back at war. I don't usually grant this much empathy to the gunman, but then, the gunman doesn't usually look much like me. Maybe he, too, listened to songs of revolution. Was that his goal? Did he expect the rest of us to mobilize and take up arms, and did we fail him? I don't want to go to war, but I have dreamed often of change—radical change—as I suspect he dreamed too. The difference might just be the shapes of those dreams and the nightmare his created.
8. “Good to see you,” they said to each other. As they walked through the Senate chambers, where both were attending a debate on the proposed Civil Rights Act of 1964, Malcolm told King, “I'm throwing myself into the heart of the civil rights struggle.” In their brief encounter, though, King and Malcolm parted ways still opposed to one another's position, but King added that he was opposed “at least insofar as I understand where he now stands.” It would be an improper revision to

speculate on what this chance meeting might've turned into had both men lived to meet again one day.

9. Moore is another Black man in uniform paraded out by the Dallas Police Department.
10. Photographer Jonathan Bachman caught Evans's saint-like poise on July 9, 2016, while covering one of the many Black Lives Matter demonstrations. The photo eventually went viral, with various news outlets and social media posts proclaiming it "iconic," "legendary," "capturing a critical moment for our country," and so on. I, too, am captivated by the photo, but especially by the figure at its center. Evans's back stands in such a straight line that I wince whenever I see the photo. She is wearing a long, earth-tone dress, which billows out at her feet. Her eyes stare resolutely ahead—not with forgiveness, as the flower and flowing dress might suggest, but with a power I'd liken only to the sun shining expressionless overhead. "She just stood there," said Bachman, commenting on the woman in his now-famous photo, but even in the moment, he knew "it was something that would tell a story." Shortly after he took the photo, Evans was arrested for obstructing a highway, for being a roadblock, for using her body in defiance without violence. It is her, or someone like her, that I now wish had arrived in Dallas just two days before instead of Johnson, the gunman. I struggle to identify with the grace and composure she brought to her activism in that moment, and it is struggle that will make my search worthwhile.
- II. But no more than a passing resemblance. While I sympathize with Johnson's anger at the ever-dying Black bodies by the ever-militarizing police force, I cannot abide by revolution pursued by way of terror. This, too, is at odds with the message and aim of the Black Lives Matter movement. We are not at war. A war implies a back-and-forth between two sides, a volleying of firepower. But there's no back-and-forth when one side owns a disproportionate amount of the country's resources, when one side draws districts so that the other must send their kids to economically disadvantaged schools using textbooks printed prior to desegregation, and when one side jumps to defend an implicitly racist law-enforcement system that retaliates with military-grade force when its naivety is exposed as fear. No, we want only to assert our humanity in the face of continued oppression. As the roll call of Black lives lost gets longer, so too do our voices get louder. Not war but a war song. Not war but a war cry. Not war but a war drum, beaten to keep us moving onward even when forward motion seems impossible.