Breathing While Black: Rude and Frightful Encounters with the Police Recalled by Distinguished African Americans, 1860-2012

by

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It is easier, perhaps, to understand the depth and persistence of African American sensitivity, fear, and grievance in regards to the police when testimony given by widely known and respected persons spanning several generations documents a history of disparate treatment compared to Whites in every corner of the nation. Humiliation, intimation, violence, and arbitrary enforcement of the law are what they experienced firsthand, and their wealth and fame did not spare them. Their horror stories of sorts, largely told in their own words and summarized by biographers, were never incomprehensible or unsympathetic to those who have opposed full racial equality. Civil rights demonstrators marching through the hostile White working class Chicago enclave of Bridgeport in 1965 were taunted with this rhyme:

Oh, I wish I was an Alabama trooper
That is what I'd truly like to be
'Cause if I was an Alabama trooper
Then I could shoot the niggers legally

Of course, many will remain indifferent to, or in denial about Black complaints of police discourtesy and brutality. Regardless, more than a century and a half of evidence provided by fifty-five noted individuals here, from Frederick Douglass to Tyler Perry, reflect the shared memory of African Americans that reinforce more than just the perception of a long history of police abuse---it dares anyone to try and prove that their bad experiences have been mere fantasies or incidents of little consequence. The evidence of this unfortunate history is with us:

Will Smith, actor, as a young man drive a nice car in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Take growing up in Philly, dealing with the police--where, one time, a cop pulled me over and, when I asked him, "Officer, did I do something?" he said, "You're a fucking nigger in a nice car. Now shut the fuck up until I figure out why I'm giving you a ticket." That I could live with, because I knew exactly what I was dealing with. It was up to me to make a decision about how to react. I did. I reported him to Internal Affairs.

"Will Smith" by Nancy Collins, *Rolling Stone*, December 10, 1998, p. 71.

James Baldwin, novelist-essayist, in Harlem in 1934.

When James was 10 years old, and encounter with two white policeman gave him his first bitter taste of racial violence. The officers spotted him playing by himself in an empty lot and decided to harass him. They taunted him with racial slurs, then beat him and left him on his back, "I can conceive of no Negro native to this country," he wrote in "The Harlem Ghetto," "who has not, by the age of puberty, been irreparably scarred by the condition of his life" (*James Baldwin* by Lisa Rosset, Chelsea House, 1989, pp. 21-22).

Alvin Poussaint, Harvard psychiatry professor and author, circa 1965.

A menacing policeman stopped me outside my office in Jackson, Mississippi, and said, "What's your name?"

I said, "Dr. Poussaint."
And he said, "What's your *first* name, boy?"
My secretary, who was black and from Mississippi, started yanking on my arm. "Tell him your first name," she pleaded.
He put his hand on his gun and said, "What's your first name?"
Finally I said, "Alvin."
He said, "Okay, *Alvin*, next time you give us trouble, we're gonna take you downtown."
Then he spun around and walked away.
I could feel myself starting to tremble.

My Soul Looks Back in Wonder: Voices of the Civil Rights Experience (AARP/Sterling, 2004) by Juan Williams et al, p. 129.

Barry White, rhythm and blues singer. In Mobile, Alabama, in 1966 upon speaking to the White female phone operator regarding a long distance call.

I went to the phone booth and said into the mouthpiece, “Baby, get me area code 213,” and gave her my number.

‘‘Just a minute, sir. The lines are tied up.’’ I sat there waiting for her to come back on the line when the police showed up in their patrol cars, tires screeching. This time they were wearing cowboy hats with badges on them. One of them came over to me. ‘‘Hear you been using profanity on the phone, boy.’’
‘‘What are you talking about?’’
‘‘Well,’’ he said slowly, with a heavy Southern drawl, "you called our operator ‘baby.’ We don’t do that down here. Where you from, boy?’’
‘‘California.’’
‘‘See, that there’s the reason you don’t know. Our niggers, they know how to talk on the phone. They know you can’t talk like that down here’’ . . . The cat eventually did let me go, but not before giving me a warning that sent a chill up my back. ‘‘We get another call in this state that you called some operator ‘baby,’ you goin’ to jail. Hear that, boy?’’

Love Unlimited (Broadway Books, 1999) by Barry White, p. 66.

Marcus Allen, Heisman Trophy winner and Pro Football Hall of Famer.

In Los Angeles, a highly publicized stop occurred in 1984 when a Hollywood Division officer pulled over professional football player *Marcus Allen*, who was driving a new Ferrari. The officer later said he thought the car was stolen. Allen, who had a gun pointed in his face, said the incident was defused only when children at a nearby school shouted, "Hey, it's *Marcus Allen*!"

"I wasn't afraid; I was just so mad," Allen told reporters.

Los Angeles Times, June 1, 1998.

Leonard Pitts Jr., Pulitzer Prize-winning columnist for the *Miami Herald*.

My youngest son was arrested last year.

Police came to my house looking for an armed robbery suspect, five-feet eight-inches tall with long hair. They took my son, six-foot-three with short braids. They made my daughter, 14, fresh from the shower and dressed for bed, lie face down in wet grass and handcuffed her. They took my grandson, 8, from the bed where he slept and made him sit on the sidewalk beside her.

My son, should it need saying, hadn't done a damn thing. In fact, I was talking to him long distance--I was in New Orleans--at the time of the alleged crime. Still, he spent almost two weeks in jail. The prosecutor asked for a high bail, citing the danger my son supposedly posed.

A few weeks later, the prosecutor declined to press charges finally admitting there was no evidence. . . . But he damage had been done. The police took a picture of my son the night he was arrested. He is on his knees, hands cuffed behind him, eyes fathomless and dead. I cannot see that picture without feeling a part of me die.

Miami Herald, October 8, 2005.

Julian Bond, civil rights activist. As a boy in the mid-1940s in Tennessee.

"I remember walking through the white section of the segregated Nashville train station and a policeman said something to my mother like, 'This is not for niggers!' and mother said very angrily, 'Don't call me a nigger!' and just strode by him with me following along. I don't think I was old enough to remember what this was really all about, but I do remember being impressed that my mother stood up to this authority figure."

Julian Bond: Civil Right Activist and Chairman of the NAACP (Enslow Publishers, 2001) by Denise M. Jordan, p. 16.

Richard Wright, novelist, as a young man in Mississippi.

Late one Saturday night I made some deliveries in a white neighborhood. I was pedaling my bicycle back to the store as fast as I could, when a police car, swerving toward me, jammed me into the curbing.

"Get down and put up your hands!" the policemen ordered.
I did. They climbed out of the car, guns drawn, faces set, and: advanced slowly.
"Keep still!" they ordered.

I reached my hands higher. They searched my pockets and; packages. They seemed dissatisfied when they could find nothing incriminating. Finally, one of them said:

"Boy, tell your boss not to send you out in white neighborhoods this time of night."
As usual, I said:
"Yes, sir."

Uncle Tom's Children's (Harper & Row, c1938, 1965) by Richard Wright, p. 10.

Mae Jemison, astronaut, in Nassau Bay, Texas.

In February of 1996, Dr. Mae Jemison, the first black woman astronaut, was stopped by a Texas police officer who alleged she made an illegal turn in her hometown. Upon discovering that Jemison had an outstanding traffic ticket, the officer cuffed her, pushed her face down into the pavement, and forced her to remove her shoes and walk barefoot from the patrol car to the police station. Commentators opined that, because she was wearing a low-cut afro hairstyle, she was mistaken for a (black) man by police officers.

"Law Enforcement Violence Against Women of Color," by Andrea J. Ritchie, in *Color of Violence: The Incite! Anthology* **(**South End Press, 2006), p. 144.

LeVar Burton, actor.

LeVar Burton of "Roots" and "Star Trek: The Next Generation" fame, is seeking an official apology today from California narcotics agents who detained him in Gilroy last week. The agents stopped Burton as part of a "profile" campaign against drug couriers from Southern California. Burton, who was en route to Ventana with his girlfriend and had gotten out of his car in Gilroy to add oil when agents approached, said one reason he was upset at the action was their refusal to tell him what was happening. "(The agent) replied, 'It's none of your business'," Burton told the *San Jose Mercury News*. State narcotics officials confirmed that certain black and Latino men are being routinely stopped by the state Bureau of Narcotics Enforcement because they fit the profile of Los Angeles gang members.

Los Angeles Times, September 15, 1988.

Diahnn Carroll, actress, on a trip from New York City to the South in 1943.

When I was about eight years old, we took a trip to North Carolina. My father was always a little apprehensive about driving that big, shiny Chrysler through the South . . . . He was very, very, careful about observing speed limits and traffic signals, but one night we were stopped. Suddenly, the flashing red lights of a police car came up behind us, and we were ordered to pull over . . . .

"Where you goin', boy?" he demanded. "Whose car are you drivin'?"
Dad answered his questions politely and directly, but that didn't satisfy the policeman. "Well, you just follow us," he ordered . . . . We were in the middle of nowhere. Even at that young age, I remember thinking that this was the end. We would die. And no one would be able to help us . . . . They took my father inside. I could see white men interrogating him through the basement window. Once again, I witnessed his terrible helplessness. The fear was so thick, I could barely breathe. I thought I would choke, and held on to my mother for dear life.

Diahnn (Little, Brown, 1986) by Diahnn Carrol with Ross Firestone, pp. 19-20.

Ray Charles, singer, as a young adult, circa 1952, stopped by police riding in an automobile in Houston, Texas.

"You blind, boy?" one of the cops said.
"Yeah," I said.
"Well, you better find a way back, 'cause we're taking this other nigger and his fucked up hairdo down to the station . . . .

Back then they didn't need no charges. They'd bust you if they felt like it. They'd call you nigger, motherfucker or anything else which tickled their fancy. And the worst thing you could do was talk back. Try to explain, try to defend yourself, try to reason---that's all the excuse the cops needed to bust you upside the head.

Brother Ray: Ray Charles' Own Story (Da Capo Press, 2003) by Ray Charles and David Ritz, pp. 127 and 147.

Charlie Mingus and ***Horace Silver***, legendary jazz artists.

Often, after my set, when the other band took over, I walked up and down Broadway to stretch my legs and get some fresh air. I recall doing this one evening and running into bassist Charlie Mingus and two white policemen having a confrontation. Mingus had been stopped by the policemen not because he had broken any law, but because he and several of his black male friends were in his car with a white woman, who happened to be Mingus's wife. Mingus saw me and shouted, "Horace Silver, I want you to witness that these men are un-American. They want to arrest me because my wife is white.

I knew if I got involved in the situation, I probably would wind up at the nearest precinct station along with them and would miss my next set at Birdland, so I ignored him and kept walking. . . . Mingus was very adamant about racial situations and was very outspoken about the way he felt. This put him in jeopardy when confronted by the police, because he didn't bite his tongue about the way he felt.

Let's Get to the Nitty Gritty (University of California Press, 2007)
by Horace Silver, p. 56.

Michael Eric Dyson, professor, author and radio-TV commentator, in 1988 upon being stopped by policemen because of a report of possible child abuse (spanking his son).

"Can I ask why you're stopping me, officer?" I asked politely and professionally. . . .
"Just get out of the car," he insisted.
As I got out of my car, I informed the policeman that I worked at Hartford Seminary.
"I'm a professor here," I said, pointing to the seminary behind me.
"Sure," the policeman shot back. "And I'm John Wayne."
. . . . As the other cops surrounded the car, the policemen hovering over me refused to explain why he stopped me. He forcefully patted me down as we both listened to Brenda (his wife) and Mike (his son) explain that nothing was wrong, that Mike was fine. . . . "We have to check on these things," the second cop offered. "Just don't be doing nothing wrong."
"He shoved me against the car to make his point. With that, the six cops got back into their cars, without apology, and drove off. I don't have to tell you that the situation was utterly humiliating.

The Michael Eric Dyson Reader (Basic Civitas Books, 2004) by Michael Eric Dyson, pp. 26-27.

Ben Chavis, civil rights leader. As a 10th grade high school student in Oxford, North Carolina, circa 1964, after being bloodied by a group of marauding White men.

The assailants were described and identified, but the police would not let Mr. Chavis (his father) swear out an arrest warrant. "One thing I will never forget" says Ben, now grown, "What hurt me more than the beating was the expression on my father's face when he realized that the police weren't going to do anything. I think my father still believed that the system would bring about some justice". . . . When Mr. Chavis and Ben returned home, Mrs. Chavis was being treated for a mild heart attack, brought on by alarmist rumors about Ben being badly stabbed during the beating. From that time on, Ben started to notice things more. Little things, like driving into a gas station with his father, the teenage attendant calling Mr. Chavis "boy," the middle-aged attendant calling his father "uncle."

Nothing Could Be Finer (International Publishers, 1978) by Michael Myerson, p. 21.

James Alan McPherson, Pulitzer Prize-winning writer, in reference to his rude encounter with a Virginia policeman.

For African-Americans every day is a day at the front. And in the most dangerous situations, class and gender differences between them dissolve. After an encounter with a policeman who didn't know he was a Pulitzer Prize winner, James Alan McPherson found out. Until then, he had been advocating an Ellisonian transracialism (a utopian goal that we'd all embrace), but he realized that a policeman will de-universalize you, on behalf of white society, or go upside your particular head.

Another Day at the Front (Basic Books, 2003) by Ishmael Reed, p. xxix.

Sam Cooke, pop singer, age 18, confronted by White policeman in a park in Memphis, Tennessee. Told by singer Marvin Jones.

Anyway, after they got in the park and settled down, they discovered these lights on them---the police had driven up behind them and put the spotlights on them and told them to get out of the car. Well, everybody got out, and they lined them all up, but Sam was the only one who had his hands in his pockets. And as they went down the line to each person and asked them where they were from, when they got to Sam, the officer got angry because he had his hands in his pockets, and he slapped him and called him a nigger and said, 'You are not in Chicago. We will hang you down here, and they'll never find your body.'"

Dream Boogie: The Triumph of Sam Cooke (Little, Brown, 2005) by Peter Guralnick, p. 52.

Angela Davis, socialist activist, around age 16 in Birmingham, Alabama in 1960.

. . . . one Sunday some friends and I were driving home from the movies. Among those in the car was Peggy, a girl who lived down the street. She was very light skinned, with blond hair and green eyes. Her presence usually provoked puzzled and hostile stares because white people were always misidentifying her as white. This time it was a policeman who mistook her for a white person surrounded by black people. And just as my friends were about to drop me off in front of the house, he forced us over to the side, demanding to know what we niggers were doing with a white girl. He ordered us out of the car and scratched all of us, except Peggy, whom he separated from the group . . . . The cop threatened to throw all of us in jail, including Peggy, whom he called a "nigger lover." When Peggy angrily explained that she was Black like all the rest of us, the cop was obviously embarrassed. He worked off his embarrassment by harassing us with foul language, hitting some of the boys and searching every inch of the car for some excuse to take us to jail.

Angela Davis: An Autobiography (International Publishers, 1988) by Angela Davis, pp. 83, 102-103.

Rafer Johnson, Olympic Gold medalist in the decathlon, dating a White woman in 1963.

Race reared its ugly head a few times when I was with Joan. Most harrowing was the night we were parked on a hilltop above UCLA, where young couples went to be alone. Suddenly we were blinded by a flashlight. It was a policeman. From the way he looked at me, and the hostile tone of his voice, I knew he would like nothing better than an excuse to use his nightstick on my head. It was terrifying. However, the minute the cop saw the name on my driver's license, his whole demeanor changed. "Oh, Mr. Johnson, so sorry," he said. If I hadn't been *that* Mr. Johnson, I'd have been a colored guy with a white girl--fair game for the nightstick or a trumped-up arrest.

The Best That I Can Be (Doubleday, 1998) by Rafer Johnson, pp. 277-278.

Bayard Rustin, civil rights activist, chief organizer of the March on Washington in 1963, upon refusing to be seated in the back of a bus in 1942.

The driver finally called the police, who reached the bus thirteen miles north of Nashville. When Rustin still refused to move, the four officers proceeded to beat him in front of the other passengers. Hustled into the back of the police car, he found himself "shaking with nervous strain" as the police verbally abused him on the way to the station. Once there, the police forced him through a gauntlet. "They tossed me from one to another like a volleyball," ripping his clothes along the way. Throughout the ordeal, Rustin maintained a Ghandhian posture of refusing to fight back physically, attempting to communicate with his assailants, and holding out the religious grounding of his disobedience. Mystified by this strange behavior, the police captain told him, "nigger, you're supposed to be scared when you come in here!" and left muttering, "I believe the nigger's crazy."

Lost Prophet: The Life and Times of Bayard Rustin (Free Press, 2003) by John D'Emilio. pp. 46-47.

Ossie Davis, actor, director, poet, and social activist. In Waycross, Georgia in the mid-1920s.

One day when I was at Northside, no more than six or seven years old, I was on my way home from school when two policemen called out to me from their car. "Come here, boy. Come over here." They told me to get in the car, I got in, and they carried me down to the precinct . . . . Later in their joshing around, one of them reached for a jar of cane syrup and poured it over my head. They laughed as if it was the funniest thing in the world, and I laughed, too. The joke was over, the ritual (of emasculating a black male) was complete. They gave me several hunks of peanut brittle and let me go . . . . For whatever reason, I decided to keep the entire incident to myself. They were just having some innocent fun at the expense of a little nigger boy. And yet, I knew I had been violated. Something very wrong had been done to me, something I never forgot.

With Ossie & Ruby: In This Life Together (Morrow, 1998) by Ossie Davis and Ruby Dee, p. 43.

Earl Graves Jr., businessman, former pro athlete and Yale and Harvard graduate.

When Earl Graves Jr. was growing up in an affluent New York City suburb, his father—the publisher of Black Enterprise magazine—always told his three sons that his greatest concern was that one of them might not make it home one night. "Not because of a car accident," Graves Jr. recalls, "but because some cop pulled us over and decided it was OK Corral that night." At 7:30 one morning last May, Graves, dressed in a suit, briefcase in hand, had just arrived at Grand Central. . . . Two plainclothes police officers flashed their badges. "I knew immediately what would happen to me if I resisted," he says, "so I stayed calm." The cops asked Graves if he was carrying a gun, then patted him down as he stood, spread-eagle, facing a wall. "It was a spectacle," he says. "I was facing the wall, my arms up in the air. Anybody could have seen me." When he asked what the cops were looking for, they said he fit the description of a suspect—a black man with short hair. "Well, that narrows it down to about 2 million people in the city," he said. . . . The officers had acted on an anonymous letter received a week earlier from a passenger who claimed that a black man—about 5'10", with a mustache—regularly carried a concealed gun on the train. Graves, who once played basketball for the Cleveland Cavaliers, is 6'4" and clean-shaven. Though the railroad's president personally apologized—as did the railroad, in several newspaper ads—Graves remains shaken. "I'm black," he says, "and that's all they saw."

"Under Suspicion" (January 15, 1996) *People*.
http://www.people.com/people/archive/article/0,,20102555,00.html

Cornel West, philosophy professor.

During his sophomore year, West and two of his roommates—who were also black—were accused of attacking a white student who lived next door to them. The police officers who arrested them tried to convince the woman that West and his roommates were the ones who attacked her, but she told the officers that West and his friends were innocent. If this woman had not convinced the police, West is certain that he and his friends would have been sent to prison. In a later interview he said, "It was that moment that reminded me how much race does matter in our society."

Cornel West (Raintree, 2006) by Corinne J. Naden, p. 25.

Sammy Davis Jr., entertainer, early 1950s.

Rand (their white agent) came to hate driving through the Midwest—Ohio, Illinois, Missouri. They got stopped a lot. "The Police would frisk Sam Sr., and I'd lean against the car. We used to drive all through the night so we wouldn't have to stop in certain places. One police officer said, 'I don't know why you're driving this man around for.' I said, 'I work for him.' One time we mentioned Sammy Davis Jr., and the cop said, 'How's that little spook?'"

St. Louis became a frightful place for the trio. Once a cop demanded Sam Sr.'s wallet, and he gave it to him. The cop lifted fifty dollars, right before their eyes. "You can go now," he said, Rand watching, astonished. A couple miles up, another cop did the same thing."

In Black and White: The Life of Sammy Davis Jr. (Alfred A. Knopf, 2003) by Wil Haygood, p. 128.

Rev. Joseph Lowery, civil rights leader in Huntsville, Alabama, early 1930s.

When I was 10 or 11 years old, I was the victim of an incident in an Alabama store. A big white police officer pushed me in the stomach with a billy club. Although I was almost out of the store, he said "Get back nigger, don't you see a white man coming?" My father tried to protect me. He went to the chief of police who told him there was nothing we could do.

And Still We Rise: Interviews With 50 Black Role Models (USA Today Books, 1988) by Barbara Reynolds, p. 146.

Bud Powell, legendary jazz pianist.

But in 1945, Powell was involved in a confrontation that dramatically altered his life and career. Only 20 years old, the pianist was brutally beaten by police while on tour in Philadelphia. Though he was allegedly drunk and disorderly, many accounts of the incident describe the reaction of the police as far beyond what the charge warranted. Powell was left incoherent and in great pain; when his condition didn't improve, he went from hospital to hospital and was eventually institutionalized.

National Public Radio.
http://www.npr.org/2008/04/09/89483119/bud-powell-bebop-pianism

Jackie Robinson, baseball pioneer, upon leaving his office and arriving at the Apollo Theater in 1972.

On my way to the lobby, an officer, a plainclothesman, accosted me. He asked me roughly where I was going, and I asked what the hell business it was of his. He grabbed me and spectators passing by told me later that he had pulled out his gun. I was so angry at his grabbing me and so busy telling him he'd better get his hands off me that I didn't remember seeing the gun. By this time people had started crowding around, excitedly telling him my name, and he backed off. Thinking over that incident, it horrifies me to realize what might have happened if I had been just another citizen of Harlem.

I Never Had It Made (Putnam, 1972) by Jackie Robinson, p. 272.

Percy Sutton, civil rights attorney. At age 13 in 1933, confronted by a policeman while distributing NAACP pamphlets in all-White neighborhood in San Antonio, Texas.

"'Nigger,' he asked me," Sutton told an interviewer years ago, "what are you doing out of your neighborhood?'" and then he proceeded to beat the hell out of me."

New York Magazine (May 27, 1974).

Jelly Roll Morton, ragtime pianist-composer, in a Helena, Arkansas pool hall circa 1908.

Pretty soon a policeman tapped me on the shoulder, said, "Where did you come from?"

I wasn't so afraid of policemens (sic), because I had seen so many of them in New Orleans and I knew policemens was just another kind of man, in a sense. But I always knew I had to respect authority, and I respected him very much. If I hadn't respected him, it would have been very very bad for me, because I had learned it didn't take them very much time in shooting you down . . . . So he said to me, he said, "I want you shuck-sharks and crook to get out of town."
I said, "I'm very sorry, but I am a musician."
He said, "A musician don't mean anything down here. We put more of *them* in jail than anybody else, because they don't want to work."
I said, "Did you say leave town?"
He said, "Yes."
I said, "Well, that will be my next move, because I don't intend to do anything but play music."

Mister Jelly Roll (University of California Press, 1973) by Alan Lomax, pp. 136-137.

Blair Underwood, actor.

An L.A. cop stopped actor Blair Underwood, then 25, in 1989 and pulled a gun on him, inspiring an L.A. Law episode. "We have all, at one time or another, been stopped by the police and harassed," the actor says of his black friends. "Because you drive a half-decent car and you're young, it's assumed that it's drug-related or you must be a gang member or drug dealer."

"Under Suspicion" (January 15, 1996) *People*.
http://www.people.com/people/archive/article/0,,20102555,00.html

Cab Calloway, bandleader and singer.

In the same week (in 1937) that Joe Louis became champion, Calloway and his wife Blanche came face to face with "the law" in Mississippi. After getting a tank of gas at a local station, Blanche Calloway and a friend entered the women's rest room. Two police officers asked Cab where the women had gone. Unsure of their whereabouts and confused by the query, he replied, "What did you say?" The police answered by clubbing him with pistols and arresting all three for disorderly conduct.

The Fight of the Century: Jack Johnson, Joe Louis, and the Struggle for Racial Equality (M.E. Sharpe, 2002) by Thomas Hietala, page 218.

Wellington Webb, Mayor of Denver, Colorado. Age 17, encountering policemen after his girlfriend crashed his car into a building in Denver in 1958.

"This nigger drove the car through the building, and we just need to take his black ass to jail," the bad cop said . . . . And then I made up the most outrageous lie . . . . At that point, the bad cop said, "Nigger, you are going to jail."

Wellington Webb: The Mayor, and the Making of Modern Denver (Fulcrum Publishing, 2007) by Wellington Webb with Cindy Brovsky, p. 48.

Miles Davis, Jazz trumpeter, in August 1959.

Miles said he was taking a break and had escorted a White girl to a taxi. A cop approached him and told him to move on. Miles says he explained he was *the* Miles Davis and was working at Birdland. The officer raised his club, and Miles, fearing that his hands or his lips would be injured, struggled with him. A nearby detective came into the fracas, and Miles received a blow on the head. A tape recorder, owned by a person living in an apartment immediately above the scene, produces the following dialogue:

"Take him to the precinct—that black c—s--. Don't let him get away free. Get that f—out of here."
"I'll punch him right in the nose, so help me."
"Why don't we all go to the precinct. I saw what happened."
"That m—f—ain't no police. He ain't no police."

The result of the incident was five stitches in Miles' head, a charge of assault on a policeman and, after being acquitted, Miles threatened a lawsuit against the city of New York which he eventually dropped.

Miles on Miles: Interviews and Encounters With Miles Davis (Lawrence Hills Books) edited by P. Maher and M. Dorr, p. 50.

Hank Aaron, baseball star, circa 1955.

One surefire way for Aaron to be noticed away from the baseball diamond was to travel in the company of a white woman. In Cincinnati, Aaron, on an off-day, visited with a friend who had married an Italian woman. She had brought her sister along and the four were driving in a car in the neighboring town of Covington, Kentucky, when they were pulled over by a policeman who asked if Aaron was married to the woman he was sitting next to in the car. When Aaron explained that he was just traveling with friends, he was told by the police officer to get out of the car and out of town as well; in Covington, the officer declared, black men didn't travel with white women.

Hank Aaron: A Biography (Greenwood Press, 2005) by Charlie Vascellaro, p. 59.

Horace Porter, literature professor, as a teenager in Georgia walking home from work.

As I took my usual shortcut through the empty parking lot of a tire company, a police car suddenly appeared. . . . "Get in," he said. I felt as though I had walked into a nightmare. I didn't look like a criminal. I was a bookworm. I wore thick black glasses. I was five-foot eight inches tall and weighed 123 pounds. But there I was inside the car. . . . After some further perfunctory and arbitrary grilling: "Boy, how do you spell through?" After I spelled it correctly, he said, "If you're so damn smart, how come you don't have your black ass at home!" Then—Praise God—he let me go.

The Making of a Black Scholar: From Georgia to the Ivy League (University of Iowa Press, 2003) by Horace A. Porter, p. 43.

Dick Gregory, comedian-author, in 1951 at age 19, after being beaten by Whites in a segregated St. Louis restaurant.

When I woke up, a white lady was kneeling in the gutter next to me, her arm under my head. Her other hand was stroking the lump on my forehead where it hit the pavement. "Everything will be all right, you're going to be all right, young man."

There was a white policeman standing next to her, and I tried to tell them that I wasn't bothering the lady, that I hadn't touched her. But my mouth was still too dry.

Leave him alone, lady, I'll take care of this. The ambulance'll be right here."
"Where are you taking him officer?"
"The nigger hospital."
"I beg your pardon?"
"Homer G. Phillips (Hospital)."
"That's too far. We'll take him to Barnes."
"Barnes ain't for niggers, lady. You'd better mind your own business."
"Officer, do you know who I am?"
"Some nigger-lover who. . ."

The lady said her name then the cop's mouth dropped open and he took a step backward. "I have your badge number and you can consider yourself fired." The cop began to apologize and help me into the ambulance.

Nigger: An Autobiography of Dick Gregory (E.P. Dutton, 1964) by Dick Gregory, p. 67.

Price Cobbs, psychiatrist, co-author of *Black Rage*, with a group of first-year Black medical students in downtown Nashville, Tennessee, circa 1955.

The other students were like me, young men joking around, making fun of one another with a lot of humorous talk as we walked along. . . . We were all dressed well, making sure that others seeing us on the street would understand that we had a certain favored status.

Suddenly I heard a shout from across the street. I looked around at two white policemen who were sitting in a squad car on the premises of a gas station. Looking at us.

"Hey, you!" one of the policemen yelled, beckoning toward us. No names. No politeness. Just "Hey, you!". . . . He wanted our attention and he wanted it now. But he clearly did not think much of us. . . . as he asked the questions, I noted how guarded the tone of my companions had become. The cool, blasé demeanor that they'd demonstrated just a moment earlier, the almost elegant arrogance, had suddenly disappeared. I looked around and saw obsequious and even frightened young men standing around me. . . . I'd never seen anything quite like this change before. Their shoulders were sloped. They were having trouble looking at the cop in the eye. . . (being from Los Angeles) I would not have reacted with the body language of servility that the southern students exhibiting at this moment.

My American Life: From Rage to Entitlement (Atria Books, 2005) by Price M. Cobbs, p-116-117.

Joe Louis and ***Sugar Ray Robinson***, champion boxers, arrested in Alabama while waiting in the White section of a bus terminal in 1944.

. . . . an MP, twirling a brown wooden billy club, sauntered over to us.
"Say, soldier," he said to Joe, "get over in the other bus station."
From Joe's expression, I knew that he hadn't understood what the guard meant, so he asked, "What you talkin' about?"
"Soldier," the MP snapped, "your color belongs in the other bus station."
"What's my color got to do with it?" Joe said. "I'm wearing a uniform like you."
"Down here," the guard said in his 'Bama drawl, "you do as you're told."
. . . . Then the MP made a mistake. He flicked his billy club and poked Joe in the ribs.
"Don't touch me with that stick," Joe growled.
"I'll do more than touch you," the MP snapped.

He drew back the billy club as if to swing it at Joe. When I saw that, I leaped on the MP. I was choking him, biting him, anything to keep him away from Joe. I wrestled him into the grass. But before Joe had a chance to get at him a few more MPs ran up and separated us. The new MPs might really have roughed us up, but some of the soldiers were shouting, "That's Joe Louis. that's Joe Louis". . . .

Sugar Ray (Da Capo Press, 1994) by Sugar Ray Robinson, p. 123.

Roland Hayes, concert tenor, in Rome Georgia in 1942 after his wife argued with a store clerk about sitting in a White section near a fan.

Someone called police and told them there was more "nigger trouble. . . . Roland Hayes, who weighs only 120 lb., told what happened next: I went to the store to rectify any trouble that might have been caused, and as I left a policeman caught me in the belt and dragged me back. I protested I had done nothing and I denied my wife had cursed [as the clerk contended]. I told them my wife didn't curse. When I said that, a man not in officer's garb gave me all he had on the jaw. Then I was dragged to the patrol car, handcuffed between two officers. I was struck again by this man not in uniform, who leaned through a window to hit me. My wife and I were put in a cell and our little girl left on the outside.

Time, July 27, 1942, p. 17.

Rev. Ralph Abernathy, minister and civil rights leader, attempting to enter his bombed church in January 1957, when confront by a White policeman.

"Don't you see that condemned sign?" he said. It don't matter who you are. Nobody goes inside the building. . . .
"Mr. Policeman," I said. "I have to go in this church. You can't stop me. I'm going inside."
He reached down and put his fingers on the handle of his revolver.
"If you go inside," he said, I'll blow your brains out". . . .

With each step I wondered if a bullet would rip into my back or if suddenly the lights would go out, but neither happened. Later Martin (Luther King Jr.) would tell me that the policeman drew his pistol halfway out of his holster, then let it slide back and stood there shaking his head. He probably thought I was crazy—and in a way I was.

And the Walls Came Tumbling Down (Harper & Row, 1989) by Ralph David Abernathy, pp. 184-185.

Joe Morgan, baseball star and commentator, who successfully sued the city of Los Angeles for being roughed up at LAX by police who mistook him for a drug courier.

Baseball Hall of Famer Joe Morgan testified Tuesday that a narcotics detective seized him by the neck, tossed him to the ground, handcuffed him and menacingly warned that he would show Morgan "what authority is all about" during a 1988 altercation at Los Angeles International Airport.

Los Angeles Times, February 13, 1991.

Thurgood Marshall, U.S. Supreme Court Justice, at age 15 in 1923, attacked by a White man because he had accidentally bumped into a white woman.

Shaking with exhaustion and rage, Marshall wanted the policeman to listen to both sides, then, after hearing the whole story, to punish the man who had started the fight. But the policeman had seen all he needed to see: a black boy was fighting with a white man, and there could be only one conclusion. Instead of interviewing Marshall, the white man, or bystanders who had seen what happened, the cop arrested Marshall and hauled him down to the local precinct.

Thurgood Marshall (Viking, 2008) by Chris Crowe, p. 165.

Paul Mooney, comedy writer and stand-up comedian.

There are two LAPD rules that every black second-class citizen of Los Angeles knows. One: you mouth off, you get run in. Two: you flee from a cop, you get beat down. . . . I've been at a traffic stop in Beverly Hills where the cop reaches across the driver and another passenger, both women, to ask me for my ID. Just me, not the two white women I'm with—and I'm not even driving. I've been hauled out of a store in Hollywood in manacles, taken to the station house, and then told it is all a big mistake. No apologies, no nothing, just a curt, "You're free to go." "I'm free to go? Then take me back to the store in handcuffs, uncuff me in front of everybody and apologize! You handcuffed me in public, now make it right in public, too!"

Black is the New White: A Memoir (Simon Spotlight Entertainment, 2009) by Paul Mooney, pp. 220-221.

Roger Wilkins, professor-journalist and civil rights leader, riding with a co-worker while in Los Angeles in 1966, followed and stopped by police at gunpoint.

"Put your hands on top of the car and spread your legs," he ordered.
I did as I was told and he frisked me roughly, giving me a pretty good chop in the balls as he did. . . . . This prick was really out to hassle me. I had given him plenty of identification, we hadn't been breaking the law, I was well dressed and hadn't been driving. These bastards had just stopped us because they had seen a white man and a Negro man riding together down Wilshire Boulevard. He had no right to point a gun at me. . . .

"Show me your goddamn driver's license," he barked. . . .
"I wasn't driving and I'm not going to show you another goddam thing," I said.

He was moving the gun threateningly when his partner came from the back end of the car and said, "Well, well, we've made a hell of a mistake. Do you know who we have here?"

A Man's Life: An Autobiography (Simon and Schuster, 1982) by Roger Wilkins, p. 166-167.

Tony Brown, broadcaster and Howard University dean.

I remember an incident (in 1963) during the planning of a peaceful march that I coordinated which featured Martin Luther King. A White cop pulled me out of a crowd of about thirty jaywalkers on the campus of Wayne State University in Detroit, where I was a student. He upbraided me, as he jerked me across the street by the arm. He was doing what they had done to Blacks for years. On-the-spot justice. It was not that incident alone, being singled out and disrespected because I was the only Black on the street, but it was the accumulation of almost daily harassment—being pulled over on the street and forced to get out of my car as though I were a convicted felon. It was not unreasonable to fear a beating, or worse. If my date was fair-skinned and the police suspected she was White, we anticipated the harassment—and we were never disappointed.

Black Lies/White Lies The Truth According to Tony Brown (William Morrow and Co., 1995) by Tony Brown, pp-42-43.

Wynton Marsalis, Grammy Award winning musician
Walter Mosley, bestselling detective/mystery writer
William Julius Wilson, professor, winner of the McArthur Prize

Wynton Marsalis says, "Shit, the police slapped me upside the head when I was in high school. I wasn't Wynton Marsalis then. I was just another nigger standing out somewhere on the street whose head could be slapped and did get slapped."

The crime novelist Walter Mosley recalls, "When I was a kid in Los Angeles, they used to stop me all the time, beat on me, follow me around, tell me that I was stealing things."

Nor does William Julius Wilson . . . wonder why he was stopped near a small New England town by a policeman who wanted to know what he was doing in those parts. There's a moving violation that many African-Americans know as D.W.B.: Driving While Black.

"Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Black Man," by Henry Louis Gates, *New Yorker* (October 23, 1995), p. 59.

Gerald Early, professor-author, in 1991, after being stopped in a suburban mall while waiting for his family by a policeman who was told he had been "lurking" there.

Linnet (his daughter) was quiet for a time. Then, suddenly, she blurted out, pleadingly:

I'm sorry, Daddy, I'm sorry I wasn't with you that night at the mall. If I was, then this wouldn't have happened. The guy wouldn't have called the police if I was walking with you."

It was a common practice for me to take my children with me whenever I went shopping, out for a walk in a white neighborhood, or just felt like going about in the white world. The reason was simple enough: if a black man is alone or with other black men, he is a threat to white. But if he is with children, then he is harmless, adorable, the dutiful father. ("Only black men have to go around finding ways of defusing their presence in public all the time," one bitter black man said to me once and I sadly agreed) . . . I would never have thought Linnet would realize this as she seems so willfully oblivious to race and racial matters in this world. I was touched and humble, moved not only by what she said, but the depth of the realization it revealed.

"Thank you," I said, putting my arm on her shoulder, "thank you. It's nice to know I've got a daughter to protect me."

Ain't But a Place: An Anthology of African American Writings about St. Louis (Missouri Historical Society Press, 1998) edited by Gerald Early, p. 255.

Harry Belafonte, singer-actor, staying at the home of actor Farley Granger in 1952.

One night after dinner, I went walking up Coldwater Canyon. Within minutes, a police car pulled up. I was told, in no uncertain terms, to put my hands on the car and spread my legs.

"Why you out here walking, boy?" one of the cops demanded.
I said I was out in L.A. making a movie for MGM.
The other cop said, "So, you're a movie star?"
"Well, I wouldn't call it that."
"What kind of crazy-ass story is this nigger telling?" one of the cops said to the other.
The cops ordered me into the car, took me down to the Beverly Hill police station, and charged me with illegal loitering. When I asked to make a phone call, the police just laughed. In due time, they told me, in due time. Two hours later, Farley became alarmed enough to call the police and report my disappearance.

My Song: A Memoir (Alfred A. Knopf, 2011) by Harry Belafonte, p. 103.

Ralph Ellison, writer, winner of the National Book Award in 1953 for *Invisible Man*, stopped at a Phoenix City, Alabama speed-trap in 1933.

. . . . it was impossible to drive either slow enough or fast enough to satisfy the demands of its traffic policemen. No one, black or white, escaped their scrutiny, but since Tuskegee students were regarded as on their way to becoming "uppity educated nigras," we were especially vulnerable. The police lay in wait for us, clocked our speed by a standard known only to themselves, and used any excuse to delay and harass us. Usually they limited themselves to fines and verbal abuse, but I was told that the year before I arrived the police had committed an act (relentlessly humiliating a student because his surname was "Whyte") that had caused great indignation on campus and became the inspiration of much bull-session yarn-spinning.

Going to the Territory (Random House, 1986) by Ralph Ellison, p. 168.

Frederick Douglass, antislavery activist, assaulted while speaking in Boston in 1860.

Douglass struggled to his feet, while police began ejecting the black men. . . . To wrest the chair from the ex-stevedore took several Unionists and a policeman. One man grabbed Douglass by the hair while another called out gleefully, "Wool won't save him." After this rough handling, Douglass and his followers were hurtled out of the hall by the police.

Frederick Douglass (W.W. Norton & Co., 1991) by William S. Freely, p. 210-211.

Roberto Clemente, baseball star, playing for the Pittsburgh in 1955.

Racism was not limited to the playing field, or the clubhouse. Some fans treated Clemente ignorantly. One asked him if he wore a loin cloth in his native Puerto. Other, more mean-spirited fans mailed him letters of hate, warning him that he should return to his ″jungle.″ On one occasion, a local police officer spotted Clemente talking to two white girls, who had asked him for an autograph. Referring to him as a "boy," the policeman told Clemente to leave the girls alone.

Roberto Clemente: The Great One (Sports Publishers Inc., 1998) by Bruce Markusen, p, 51.

Booker T. Washington, educator, presumed guilty of burglary and harassing White women and arrested after being severely beaten by a white accuser in New York City in 1911.

Lieutenant Robert Quinn decided to book the black man first and have his wounds attended to later**.** When Washington now gave his name for the first time, the lieutenant refused to believe him. Washington produced a calling card but the officer was still skeptical. Rummaging through his pockets, Washington found a railroad pass in his name and a letter addressed to him. Finally convinced of Washington's identity and of the improbability of such a man's being a burglar, the lieutenant dismissed all charges against him and, to (the white accuser's) chagrin, entertained charges against him.

Booker T. Washington: The Wizard of Tuskegee, 1901-1915 (Oxford University Press, 1983) by Louis Harlan, p. 382.

Tyler Perry, actor-director, his thoughts after being stopped in his car and rudely interrogated in Atlanta, Georgia in April 2012.

My mother would always say to me, "if you get stopped by the police, especially if they are white policemen, you say 'yes sir' and 'no sir', and if they want to take you in, you go with them. Don't resist, you hear me? Don't make any quick moves, don't run, you just go." My mother was born in 1945 into a segregated hotbed town in rural Louisiana. She had known of many colored men at the time who were lynched and never heard from again. Since I was her only son for ten years, growing up she was so worried about me. It wasn't until after I heard her voice that I realized that both of these officers were white.

From Tyler Perry's April 1, 2012 *Facebook* post.