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The Day Tajon Got Shot: An Introduction

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In March of 2015, ten young women aged twelve to fifteen came together to write a novel. *The Day Tajon Got Shot* is a critical, personal novel about one community's response to the shooting and consequent death of an unarmed Black teenager during the burgeoning Black Lives Matter movement. Shout Mouse Press, a nonprofit writing and publishing program dedicated to amplifying unheard voices, brought these teens together for a writing workshop through the after-school program at Beacon House in Washington, DC.

According to the book's introduction of the titular Tajon, he is "...16 and black. He's tall and skinny, and he has dreadlocks. Tajon works hard and tries his best to be good. He does OK in school. He doesn't hang with the wrong crowd. He has plans, he's determined... Tajon is the one who gets shot" (xiv). The power of the last statement resonates throughout the book as we see the teen writers grappling throughout the text with the idea of who Tajon is in relation to all of the people affected by his shooting. In their writing workshop, each teen chose a character to write and was encouraged to "look at [the story] through a prism, from ten different angles, so that every refraction illuminated a new way of seeing" (viii). The writers' focus and commitment to opening up and examining the characters, including the police officer who shot Tajon, makes the novel seem more like an ongoing, poetic stream of consciousness that reflects back to readers the thoughts of connected and concerned young people. Though the voices of young people are often stifled and censored by the inequitable systems of media representation and US politics, the social injustices perpetuated through the oppressive systems are often enacted on their bodies. So it's especially appropriate to have them represented in such a unique text.

Photographs punctuate the progress of the book, giving faces to the characters and emphasizing their humanity in a tangible way. The events of the book take place over ten days

and capture the emotion and quick response represented in pictures of headlines and shared videos. The book ends like so many of the stories of young unarmed victims of police shootings -- with death. The authors offer a poignant reason for choosing this ending that unfortunately is so commonplace. They explain, “We didn’t want Tajon to die. We didn’t want that. But. These are all the unarmed people of color killed by police in our country, just since we started writing this book” (154-161). The writers follow this statement with a list over 160 names; the list does not include “cases where it was contested whether the victim was using a weapon -- like the back-to-back killings of Alton Sterling and Philando Castile” (Footnote 1, 161). These are the stories and lives that informed the writing of this book and to a large degree the way these young authors enter and interact with the world. This book and the movements led by young people that have come thereafter, like the March for Our Lives, showcase the willingness of young authors and activists to wrestle with the all of the gray area that is often dismissed by politicians, pundits, and even more seasoned changemakers.

It was my incredible privilege to engage with three of the authors of the text: Temil Whipple, who wrote the characters of Tajon and Tasha (Tajon’s sister), Jonae Haynesworth, who wrote the character of Camilla (Tajon’s mother), and Mikaya Holmes, who wrote the character of Dwayne (Tajon’s father). Below is our conversation facilitated with the help of Kathy Crutcher, editor of *The Day Tajon Got Shot (TDTGS)* and the founder of Shout Mouse Press. Some of the responses were collective responses (CR) edited together by Kathy, but specific comments from the authors will be noted by their names.

An Interview With the Authors

Breanna: Do you think of yourselves as activists and what does that word mean to you? Do you see changes in the conversations around youth activism since you wrote and published *TDTGS*?

Collective Response (CR): *An activist is somebody trying advocate for change. So we're on our way to being activists, because of the act of writing this book.*

We wrote to make a change. To show from the perspective of younger people how we feel. It's a problem in society that nobody ever asks what you think to a younger person, just to adults.

Nobody asks us, and we're the ones in the situation. It shouldn't matter how old you are to have a say in something.

Before we wrote this book, we wanted to make change, but we didn't really have a way to have a say-so. Now though, we can do interviews, we can write books, we can give speeches. We feel like people are taking our perspective more seriously now.

Temil: *I gave this book to my teacher last year, and she was like, 'I never knew you could do something like this. This is so amazing. I love this book so much.' I felt good, like I accomplished something. And it helped me with college and scholarship essays, too. At the end of the year we were asked to do an end-of-year project -- like to write a poem or essay -- on an ongoing problem in the world. And I was like, an essay? I wrote a book!*

Since our book was published, young people — and their educators, librarians, parents — all over the country are reading and discussing our book. It's like we've really accomplished something; people are listening to our stories.

Breanna: Can you talk some about your individual motivations for writing the particular stories and characters you did? What/who influenced the voices you presented in the book?

Temil: *I chose to write the perspective of Tajon because we all know what was happening with the killings of Black men by police officers, and I just wanted the world to know the point of view from the victim.*

From experience growing up around here, I see lots of kids like Tajon. So I just used what I saw from everyday life. Tajon was trying to be a better person, but with all the things going on in his life -- with his dad beating on his mom and seeing that every day in his household -- he had to do the things that fathers would normally do. His own father couldn't do it. So he had to provide for his sister and his mom. All he knew was to sell weed. It was the easy way out. It was the way he had seen other people in his neighborhood make quick money, so he thought he could do it. And then it backfired on him.

He was trying to make a deal, and he didn't know who he was selling to. It could have been a setup. But it wasn't the deal that got him. It was the cop. The cop thought Tajon was dangerous

because when the cop showed up, Tajon ran. But if you're a Black man and you see a White police officer, you're not going to think twice. You're going to run. That's not the right thing to do, but they know they're a target. They're going to try to save their life first. And Tajon was young. He was my age. He was just scared. Fear put running in his legs.

Jonae: *First of all, Camilla is a mom. I wrote her the way I did because I tried to imagine how mothers feel when their kids are being hurt by those who they think are protecting them. I tried to put myself in a mother's shoes. I just acted like it was me in that situation. She loved her son. She wanted him to do well in school. She knew he was selling and didn't want him to, but in the end he was her son and she loved him no matter what.*

She's also a victim herself. Her husband beats her. There are lots of problems at home, some are the reasons that her son is selling drugs. I've seen it before a lot of times in my community. I also watch a lot of TV! (ha!) And so I knew that she could love her husband even if he hurts her. She knew that he could better. She thought he could get help for drinking. She thought he could change. She had faith in him.

Camilla didn't have belief in the system, though. She thinks that no one ever really gets justice. She thinks protests don't work. That they don't listen to the people. She won't get any answer or any relief from marching around with a sign. In our book, she gets frustrated with her daughter who thinks it will do some good. I wanted to show that perspective, too, because it's not like protests fix everything. Camilla knew they didn't.

Makiya: *I wrote the perspective of Dwayne, Tajon's father. Dwayne is complicated. Even though he was a drunk father, he was still trying to make sure his family was doing what they should be doing. He was trying his best, trying to control his anger. Camilla was giving him a hard time about it, and he didn't think that was right. So he got mad, and sometimes it got out of control.*

I guess I just wanted to get into his mind, into his shoes. Everybody was already understanding the mother's side, the daughter's side, and the son's side, and I just wanted to hear from the father. I wanted to understand him better so he was not just the bad guy. Explore why he couldn't/wouldn't control his anger. Part of him was just trying to do what he had to do.

In this world, some people have fathers, and some don't. In this story, they do, but he's got problems. In my life, my father is my role model. He provides for my family. He makes sure that I'm straight, that I don't have to ask for nothing. He models a good father. But not everyone has a father like mine.

Temil: *I also wrote the perspective of Tasha, Tajon's sister. Tasha loved her brother. So when [he got shot], Tasha poured all of her energy into protesting. She knew her brother would do anything for her, so she did anything for him. That's like me. I'm a sister, and I feel as though I would do anything for my brother to get justice, too.*

I haven't done a lot of protests before, but I did take part in a school walk-out over the election of Donald Trump. We walked down to the Trump Hotel, and everybody had signs. There was a lot of police, but they weren't doing anything to us as long as we weren't violent. So that informed how I wrote Tasha's scenes. I just thought it was important to write a protest scene because that's a part of what people do to find justice. It's a way to see you have a lot of people on your side.

Breanna: How did you see *TDTGS* fitting into national narratives around police violence and gun violence while you were writing the stories? What did/does it mean to you to have your thoughts about police violence explored with this book? What do you think your roles are in continuing to emphasize the importance of every person affected by police and gun violence?

CR: *As we were writing, it was like every other week something new happened in the real world. We would start workshops talking about what had happened in the news. It was hard to hear all the stories. Especially like Tamir Rice, who was our age. He got shot over a nerf gun. The fact that it was happening at the time made us put ourselves in their shoes and think about how they felt. We watched videos of mothers of victims being interviewed and read interviews with police officers. It was happening all around us.*

By promoting our book and speaking at events, we can show that we're serious about these issues. We're dedicated to making a change. We hope that people will take our book as a lesson. Our story makes it personal.

Breanna: Thank you to Kathy and most of all thank you to Temil, Jonae, and Mikaya for sharing your experience and time with this journal!