



THE CITY CLUB OF CLEVELAND

The City Club of Cleveland is one of the nation's great free speech forums. A product of the Progressive Era, we were founded in 1912 and are one of the nation's oldest continuous independent free speech forums, renowned for our tradition of debate and discussion. For more than a hundred years, all of our speakers—from sitting presidents to community activists—have answered unfiltered, unrehearsed questions directly from the audience.

We firmly believe in the free expression of all ideas and the benefits of an open exchange. We are non-partisan—we do not take positions on issues—and we are fierce advocates of engagement. In our second century of service, we produce more than a hundred programs every year for the benefit of the community.

[www.cityclub.org](http://www.cityclub.org)

## GTK / PRESS

Working in the tradition of independent presses since its inception, GTK Press publishes works of theory, fiction, poetry, madness, economics, satire, sexuality, science fiction, activism and confession through several print projects. GTK Press is a cooperative print workshop interested in melding high and low forms of cultural expression into a nuanced and polemical vision of the present.

For more information about our operations, programs and book projects visit:

[www.guidetokulchur.com](http://www.guidetokulchur.com)

# A RACE ANTHOLOGY:

## DISPATCHES AND ARTIFACTS FROM A SEGREGATED CITY

EDITED BY DAN MOULTHROP  
+ RA WASHINGTON



THE CITY CLUB OF  
CLEVELAND

GTK  
PRESS

Cleveland, OH  
2016

## Were You Scared?

Sarah Marcus

*Republished from Luna Luna Magazine, August 19, 2014*

\*All students named in this essay are at least 18 years of age and have given their consent.

It's 4:30 and we are sitting around on the floor of the dirty hallway outside of my "cloffice," which is literally a very small utility closet that I joke about doing yoga in each morning. We are using the paper cutter and several children's-sized, safe, "microbiotic" scissors, preparing "pocket poems" for National Poetry Month. I am in charge of posting poems all around the school next week, so I offered extra credit to any seniors in my Creative Writing class who wanted to help. Anthony grabs the paper cutter and insists on cutting too much card stock at one time. He doesn't cut down in one smooth motion; he's chopping them up. I keep bugging him about the terrible grinding sound, about the ragged edges and being careful, but he tells me to "relax" because "they look great."

Dajah and I opt for the kid scissors, and Devonte watches and pretends to do work for another class. The hallways won't clear out for another hour at least, so people have to step over us as they pass by.

Because of the book we're reading in my Resistance Writing class, Jodi Picoult's *The Storyteller*, our conversation naturally turns to funny family stories and funerals. We laugh and talk about my "character first" boarding school for delinquents, and why I wasn't home "growing up" with my sister. I love these moments the most, when we are relaxed and sharing secrets. I spot two of my freshmen making out in the stairwell. I say in my teacher voice, "Okay, less touching, more leaving please," and, trying to be serious a few moments later, "Come on guys, let's leave a little room for God." I chuckle, picking up the poems again, and Dajah says, "What?"

"I'm old now," I say, "and I finally understand the hell I put my teachers through."

"Yeah, and you lived at your school!" she says.

"You was bad, Ms. Marcus," Devonte chimes in.

"Yeah," I say. "I was."

Anthony looks up and asks, "What's the difference between me and you, Ms. Marcus? I mean, besides your graduate degree? Teachers are always saying that... their degree."

"What do you mean?" I ask.

"You know what I mean!"

"Well, I'm a woman," I smile. Dajah and Devonte snicker at my jest.

"Forget it... it's stupid," he says.

"No, it's definitely not stupid, and I honestly want to answer your question—I'm just not sure what you're asking. Can you try to explain it to me?"

"What's it like to work with a bunch of black kids, Ms. Marcus? You know, urrrrban kids?"

"What do you mean?" I ask.

And he says, "Were you scared?"

I think for a moment. I say that I had never been in a situation where I needed to discipline anyone before. That when I taught college and someone wasn't behaving right and I asked them to leave, they would just leave and go wherever adults go when you kick them out of your classroom. "But I am responsible for you. It's different," I say. I'm responsible for keeping you safe—for keeping you in my classroom. I was scared to discipline you, because I didn't know how.

I tell them a story about my first day teaching high school when, after I asked him to move seats, a very tall male student sneered, "You think you're the fucking queen of the classroom." I told them that he went on aggressively like this, standing over me, for what felt like several minutes. How I stood there like a deer in headlights watching, waiting for another teacher to step in and rescue me. How I immediately knew that this was the wrong choice. (I don't explain to them how this power dynamic felt so impossibly heavy in that moment. How when he said "queen of the classroom," I heard "white," and was mortified for a million reasons.)

I tell them how, finally, another teacher did come to my rescue, and after he calmed down, the student apologized. I do not say how eventually, although I still flushed with guilt, I realized that I had forgotten that I was the adult, because in that moment I could only think of my whiteness. I tell them what I learned: if I wanted this student's respect, I should show up with a handmade crown and give him a hard time for at least two weeks. They laugh. I say, "I have learned to take my job seriously and not myself." I want to say, I have learned that nothing that I could do, any consequence I might give, would punish you more than you already are every single day.

I've developed a good relationship with that student. Around 10:30 AM., daily, he gives me a high five and asks for the keys to my cloffice.

"How are you today, Ms. Marcus?" he asks.

"I'm great, thanks! How are you?"

"I'm pretty black," he smiles widely.

In the beginning, this was some sort of test.

"Right bottom drawer," I say, really as a reminder for him to not snoop around the graded papers on my desk, but he already knows where I keep them. I buy boxes and boxes of granola bars. I ask my parents to help me buy more. They are always gone within days.

I make a decision. I turn back to Anthony and say I was scared, but I wasn't scared of you. I was scared of what's inside of all the "bandos" (derelict structures). I was scared to walk past the entrances with the police officers in bulletproof vests. I was scared the morning I could see that the lone crosswalk officer had to choose between walking students across the street and dealing with the domestic abuse situation at the house on the corner. The man screaming, "Let me in, you fucking whore," and "I'll kill you, bitch." I was scared that first month of school when there was a double homicide outside of our building, a drug deal gone bad, the bodies found a day later in the yard. When the loudspeaker told us we would not be going into lockdown. When the loudspeaker told us we were safe. When I wanted to tell you that murder in my neighborhood was a movie, was a television show, was an "over there." I

tell him how my heart breaks each time one of our students is mugged, is held at gunpoint, in this neighborhood, because it's well known in the community that many of our students have iPads from school. I want to tell him that I am scared most of failing you, because you deserve the world. Because I am one person, and I am deeply flawed.

---

"You're all a bunch of young, pretty white people who think they can just come in here and save the poor black kids," a female senior tells me in the art room where I am sitting and unconsciously picking up and gluing paper clips, dirt, and salt back onto the already crusty table.

"You're probably right," I say. I talk freely of my privilege. Pretending is worse. I wonder out loud how we can provide these desperately needed opportunities to families of modest means without people feeling like we are trying to "save" them.

I try to show my students how we are the same and how we are not. We share our freewrites and poems with each other. We talk about the value of empathy and vulnerability. We create a safe, supportive space. My seniors really get to know their classmates. They feel connected to kids they didn't get along with before. They let down their guard. They care. I teach my seniors June Jordan and Lucille Clifton, because the only black poet they have ever read is Langston Hughes. I teach them about Nelson Mandela, but only think to do so because he is dead and Maya Angelou wrote a eulogy poem.

After I assign homework, there is the usual cacophony of teeth sucking and exacerbated sighs. "Are you blowing kisses at me," I ask? "That is so sweet!"

"Ewww, gross. Ms. Marcus that's just wrong! Uuck!"

"I think it's beautiful," I say. "Thank you."

---

My younger sister, Michelle, comes to visit from L.A. She is an editor at

an artsy fashion magazine. I ask her to come in and talk to my students about her job. I know that my girls will fall in love with her and they do. She is all of the girliness that I am not. Sometimes, in the study hall I proctor, one of my senior girls asks to braid my hair. This feels so childish, so foreign, so loving, so uncomfortable. She's terrible at it, but I would never say so. Everyone teases her for being my favorite, because she is. I let her practice grading all of the freshmen papers even though I have to regrade them all afterwards. Her comments are fantastically blunt. I cross most of them out and write something less antagonistic. I know that she will love my sister, too.

I tell my sister to stay on the main roads, to not follow her GPS, to lock her doors, and to put her purse in the trunk. These are the things I used to do. My boyfriend recently installed a new stereo in my beaten-up 2003 Honda Civic. My car is falling apart. I have electrical tape on my windshield and mustache-themed duct tape on my door handles. My students tease me. My boyfriend asks me to please take my stereo out when I park at school. He makes me promise. I do this faithfully for one month.

I remind Michelle to dress modestly—after all this is a Catholic School—and to bring cookies—a lot of cookies. When she's on her way here, I wonder if I've made a terrible mistake asking her to come. I wonder if I have the relationship with my students that I think I do. I have seen the wily noncompliance that destroys the morale of many substitute teachers, but this is someone I love, and they love me, right? I have to leave the building to get Michelle. I bring keys because every door on the outside of the entire school is locked to keep our kids safe, and every door inside the school is locked to keep our things—our wallets and phones and computers—safe.

My freshmen girls love Michelle and her outfit—they love her magazine. They love the dresses and the hair and the beautiful pictures, and they all want to hug her. I forgot to warn her about the touching. I tell them how sweet they are and that the other Ms. Marcus might appreciate having some personal space after her long trip. I am someone who has always needed complete trust to be affectionate with people, but I

have adapted here. Even when I don't want to be touched, even when it's clear that my students have not had the opportunity to change their clothes in a few days or take care of their bodies, even then, I tell myself that these kids need love.

At the end of my senior class, Michelle walks with me around the room to collect highlighters. Anthony is literally running around the classroom in circles. I see him pocket at least five highlighters. He hands me the two that he is holding. I raise my eyebrows and hold out my hand. He smiles and looks at Michelle, who is now looking a bit uncomfortable.

"Please don't steal my highlighters," I say.

Anthony starts to giggle, "Are you accusing me of stealing... because I'm black, Ms. Marcus?"

"No," I roll my eyes, "I'm accusing you because I can see them in your pocket right now."

Anthony thinks this is funny and it is and it isn't.

---

Sometimes I don't know what to say. One of my freshmen girls approaches me in study hall, leaning off the back of her desk and smacking her bubble gum and says, "Ms. Mar Mar, you seem like you'd be cool to hang out with" and "Did you know I almost got shot last week?" Then this 14-year-old proceeds to tell me about being at a party on Tuesday night where there was a drive-by. She and her friend were standing outside talking about Instagram. When she saw the car, she ducked, but her friend didn't move in time and was shot. The bullet entered in her ear and came out through her eye. My student describes the horror afterwards, her friend screaming that she couldn't breathe, how she fought the paramedics and police. She describes her friend's family collapsing in grief in the same tone that she always speaks in: "real." She tells me that she spent the night in the hospital.

When I say that she must have felt absolutely terrified, she says that she's seen worse. She says it's not like her friend died or anything. This,

like many of Cleveland's shootings, was not on the news. I ask her if she can avoid returning to that place. She shrugs and says that her great aunt lives four houses down. I try to give my best "you are supported and loved and it's okay to grieve over the trauma of this situation" speech, but she's one step ahead of me. "It's just how it is, Mar Mar" she says. I tell her that I am so proud of her for being here, and I reiterate the importance of keeping up with her schoolwork (she's almost failing my literature class), which seems so trite in this moment and also like the most significant thing in the whole world.

---

We are finishing up with the poems, and the halls have mostly cleared out. The school begins to feel empty. I ask them if they are ever scared. They don't talk about this neighborhood, but rather, Anthony tells me a story about the time he and his cousins were pulled out of their car by the police while they were waiting in a friend's driveway in a white neighborhood. The police accused them of being in someone's backyard where a break-in had just occurred. He says that three cop cars followed them two cities over, tail to tail. He talks about how terrified his cousin was. How his cousin had never been in a situation like that. I say, "I can only imagine how terrified you were." I tell him that this is unfair and awful, but he already knows.

I look at my watch. It will be dark out by now. "Let's get out of here!" I say. I thank them for their help, I tell them how much I love them, I promise a ridiculous amount of extra credit, and we walk down the three flights of stairs. We give high-fives. I remind them to do their homework. As I begin to leave, I look over my shoulder and call out, "Be safe," and they turn back and say, "You too, Ms. Marcus." I walk quickly to my car so I can release the tears I have been holding back, because I get to drive home.

*The voice of teachers runs through this anthology, and it is no accident. It is a predominantly white teaching force that does the work of educating African Americans in our urban centers. In the essay that follows, English teacher Charles Ellenbogen reflects on encountering Cleveland as an outsider, and working with his students and members of the community to make sense of race relations here.*

## Learning Cleveland, Teaching Cleveland

Charles Ellenbogen

The police handcuffed him and asked if there was anyone he wanted to call before he left. He shrugged, and so they led him out. I saw the way he adjusted his walk and realized that he knew how to walk in handcuffs. "Enough," I said to myself. I thought, "How can I teach students about the *Odyssey* or whatever else when they kept having their education interrupted by legal issues?" The question slowly evolved into, "Why should I teach students about the *Odyssey* or whatever else when they keep having their education interrupted by legal issues?"

It was far from our first incident. A visit from an award-winning poet was interrupted by a visit from the gang unit. I watched an advisee get accosted by a large, bulletproof-vest-wearing officer who had driven onto the sidewalk to cut her off. After he let her go, I approached, tentatively, to find out what she'd done. "She was jaywalking," the officer said. Another advisee arrived 11 weeks into the school year. I watched him take his vision test and then dig into a math assignment. Three days later, he was picked up by the police and my principal reported to me that the officer had asked if he should "parade" him around the school as an example. She, in no uncertain terms, declined.

We moved to Ohio in the summer of 2013, a time of great energy, both positive and otherwise. My Rust Belt stereotypes about the city were quickly shattered by my increasing awareness of all of the green space. We were dismayed to learn that the *Plain Dealer* was reducing its delivery to four days a week and excited to discover Brews and Prose

and the rest of the emerging literary scene. LeBron James had not yet returned and Johnny Manziel had not yet been selected. One hundred and thirty seven shots had already been fired, but Cudell Park was still the name of a Rec Center. Shaker Heights, our new home, seemed idyllic and Cleveland seemed quite troubled. Nothing, I was soon to learn, was quite that simple.

By the fall of 2014, I was fortunate to be connected with Peggy Schauer. She was starting a new public school—long a dream of mine—and planned to take ideas I'd only encountered in books and put them into action. I believe in education, and I very quickly believed in her vision for this new school. It felt like a leap into the unknown, but thanks to her, my understanding of the Cleveland Plan and the overall energy I felt (it was and remains a palpable feeling), I decided, as Peggy and I sat together in a coffee shop near the Trinity Cathedral, that it was a leap I wanted to take.

The freedom Ms. Schauer granted her teachers was both liberating and unnerving. As an English teacher, I was used to being anchored to things, to nouns, specifically to books. But our curriculum was designed to be less about nouns, and more, like the Montessori programs I've encountered and researched, about verbs. What the students needed to know was to be less important than what they needed to know how to do. A predetermined curriculum was not to be the driver. The teachers were not to be the driver. Instead, our foundation was to be our relationships with our students (100 percent students of color, some of whom were over-age and under-credited) and their voices. In order to get to know the students and begin to design the curriculum through which I would try to teach them literacy skills, I had to get to *know* them. In order to get to know them, I had to get them to talk. They were generally willing to talk and no matter where we started, the conversation invariably ended up on a topic very much on their minds and, not coincidentally (I thought), very much in the news—the police.

They quickly corrected an assumption I made. While they were attentive to the names and vocabulary that were quickly becoming part of the national conversation, it was for them the daily encounters, the

microaggressions, that they wanted to discuss. So I developed a seminar based on police-community relations. I found support from the Cleveland and Garfield Heights police who provided speakers. Terrell Pruitt, the Ward 1 Cleveland Councilman, helped me make connections. The ACLU made a presentation to help the students know their rights. The local activist group Puncture the Silence provided speakers and support. Mostly, the students told stories and mostly, I, a white person new to Ohio and living in Shaker, listened. What I didn't do, as Ms. Schauer pointed out, is have them do anything. An effort to have the students produce presentations based on a proposed solution was largely unsuccessful. I learned a great deal, but I am not sure what the students learned. And I had no rubric in place to evaluate what they may have learned.

Michael Brown, Freddie Gray, Eric Garner. Then, in November, Tamir Rice. And it was all on camera. In the meantime, some of our students continued to be entangled with the law. Students continued to share stories with me. They were clearly engaged by the topic. I needed to alter my approach from one focused primarily on engagement to one focused on learning.

In education, there is a concept known as “backwards design.” This excerpt from *Alice in Wonderland* explains it well:

“Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?”

“That depends a good deal on where you want to get to.”

“I don't much care where—”

“Then it doesn't matter which way you go.”

In education, it matters which way you go. As I kept researching and finding resources, I turned, as I so often do, to Ms. Schauer for guidance. Together, we looked at the competencies we wanted our students to demonstrate and discussed which ones best matched the content. We decided on Reading and Writing Informational Texts. The students needed to understand, for example, how to read and interpret information about rates of lead poisoning and abandoned houses in Cleveland, graphs of suspension rates in Ohio, and the websites of private prison

corporations. Serena Williams' success and the comments she received became the foundation for a conversation about stereotype threat. In order to understand such information and demonstrate their mastery of the skill of reading informational texts, the students needed to be able to create informational texts to explain what they learned to others. After all, what better proof is there of your mastery of a skill than your ability to demonstrate it as you teach it to someone else?

And I kept the speakers coming. It was important to both Ms. Schauer and myself that we not fall prey to what the author Chimimanda Adichie calls "the danger of a single story." We needed to include the perspective of the police, and the Cleveland police continued to be quite generous with their time. One officer even brought in a guide created by the police about how to handle yourself when stopped by the police.

Speaking of battles, President Dwight D. Eisenhower once said, "that plans are useless, but planning is indispensable." I had done my planning, but this guide required me to throw out my plans. I retrieved copies of the guide that the ACLU had provided about how to manage yourself if you were stopped by the police and compared it with the one the police provided. The differences were both striking and telling. And that became our work. I gave each student a copy of both guides and together, in small groups, and individually, I asked them to identify the differences in word choices, graphics, order of information and to interpret them by creating their own informational texts explaining to their peers about how to handle themselves if they were stopped the police ACLU's "What to Do if You're Stopped by the Police", 2015

As the Tamir Rice case lingered, things began to turn at school. Students began to show me their examples of how two different websites covered the same story. One young man would stop in each morning and together we would check *The Guardian's* website to learn if there had been any changes in the number of people killed by the police. One student began turning her attention to issues related to the police in her spoken word pieces. Another, having been stopped by the police, reported on the reaction he'd received from an officer after he'd asserted (correctly) that, since he was not under arrest that he did not have to sit

in the back of the police car. The students were finding their voices. They were learning to speak.

A relative of Tamir Rice agreed to meet our students. She was scheduled to visit with students for 40 minutes. She had them mesmerized for over two hours and agreed to return. The director of the FBI came to Cleveland, and our students were invited to attend. The Youth Forum at the City Club of Cleveland hosted a conversation on community-police relations and Ms. Schauer encouraged me to bring a group. One of our students asked a question that prompted an interview by our local NPR station. When one of the panelists asked the crowd of mostly students of color a question, and our two tables of students were the only ones who responded correctly, I knew Ms. Schauer was right. While the topic of the relationship between teens of color and the police is inexhaustible, our students clearly knew a great deal. It was time to do something more than read and write informational texts. But what?

A representative from Puncture the Silence, a member of the City Club's Youth Council and two Cleveland officers (including one, a female officer of color, who had attended the City Club forum) agreed to join us back at school after the forum to continue the conversation. I had sought a conversation, but it quickly turned, at least at first, into a question and answer session. Myths about the police were dispelled. Relationships began to thaw. Stories were shared, both by the police and by the students. Everyone agreed that the conversation should continue. When asked later about the officers, students were impressed by their forthright answers, their openness and their honesty.

But Ms. Schauer's challenge remained. It was time for the students to do more. How, I wondered, could they demonstrate their learning in an authentic way? Well, I am an English teacher. It was time for a book. Thanks, once again to Ms. Schauer and the flexible model she's created, I gathered those students who'd proven most engaged in the topic and (with me fighting my urge to be in control of every step of the way), we began to create a book. We're still putting it together. I'm trying to be just the final proofreader.

There's an epilogue now, or at least a new chapter. The prosecutor



in Ohio decided not to bring indictments against anyone involved in the death of Tamir Rice. There are many of us who disagree. Some, not in the numbers of Baltimore or Ferguson, have taken to the streets. Some want the prosecutor removed. Some want the grand jury process changed. So the book we write will be necessarily incomplete. There is no way we can cover all of the elements of both what happened to Tamir Rice and how it stands as one of many examples of what's going on in our country right now. That's been much of what I've learned as I've explored this issue on my own and with my students. There is nothing about this that is simple or linear. If you try to map this issue, it will look like Christmas lights that have been left in the box too long.

And even if we could cover every angle, the minute the book comes off the presses, it will be outdated. It has to be. The story continues to be written. The question is who is controlling the narrative. There is an African proverb that says, "Until the lion learns to speak, the tale of the hunt will always glorify the hunter." It is my job to teach my students how to speak—with their words, with their pens, and, most importantly, with their actions.