

# Gary Younge: Farewell to America

After 12 years in the US, Gary Younge is preparing to depart – as the country's racial frictions seem certain to spark another summer of conflict

**Gary Younge**

Wednesday 1 July 2015 01.00 EDT

**F**or the past couple of years the summers, like hurricanes, have had names. Not single names like Katrina or Floyd – but full names like Trayvon Martin or Michael Brown. Like hurricanes, their arrival was both predictable and predicted, and yet somehow, when they landed, the effect was still shocking.

We do not yet know the name that will be attached to this particular season. He is still out there, playing Call of Duty, finding a way to feed his family or working to pay off his student loans. He (and it probably will be a he) has no idea that his days are numbered; and we have no idea what the number of those days will be.

The precise alchemy that makes one particular death politically totemic while others go unmourned beyond their families and communities is not quite clear. Video helps, but is not essential. Some footage of cops rolling up like death squads and effectively executing people who posed no real threat has barely pricked the popular imagination. When the authorities fail to heed community outrage, or substantively investigate, let alone discipline, the police, the situation can become explosive. An underlying, ongoing tension between authorities and those being policed has been a factor in some cases. So, we do not know quite why his death will capture the political imagination in a way that others will not.

But we do know, with gruesome certainty, that his number will come up – that one day he will be slain in cold blood by a policeman (once again it probably will be a man) who is supposed to protect him and his community. We know this because it is statistically inevitable and has historical precedent. We know this because we have seen it happen again and again. We know this because this is not just how America works; it is how America was built. Like a hurricane, we know it is coming – we just do not yet know where or when or how much damage it will do.

Summer is riot season. It's when Watts, Newark and Detroit erupted in violence in the 1960s, sparked by callous policing. It's when school is out, pool parties are on and domestic life, particularly in urban centres, is turned inside-out: from the living room to the stoop, from the couch to the street. It's when tempers get short and resentments bubble up like molten asphalt. It's when, to paraphrase Langston Hughes, deferred dreams explode.

This is not my desire; it is my prediction. You can feel it building with every new Facebook post, viral video and Twitter storm. You can hear it from conversations with strangers at post offices,

liquor stores and coffee shops. It is an unpleasant prediction to make because, ultimately, these riots highlight a problem they cannot, in themselves, solve; and it is an easy one to make because, as one bystander in Baltimore put it when disturbances flared there earlier this year: “You can only put so much into a pressure cooker before it pop.”

This is the summer I will leave America, after 12 years as a foreign correspondent, and return to London. My decision to come back to Britain was prompted by banal, personal factors that have nothing to do with current events; if my aim was to escape aggressive policing and racial disadvantage, I would not be heading to Hackney.

But while the events of the last few years did not prompt the decision to come back, they do make me relieved that the decision had already been made. It is why I have not once had second thoughts. If I had to pick a summer to leave, this would be the one. Another season of black parents grieving, police chiefs explaining and clueless anchors opining. Another season when America has to be reminded that black lives matter because black deaths at the hands of the state have been accepted as routine for so long. A summer ripe for rage.

\* \* \*

**I arrived in New York just a few months** before the Iraq war. Americans seemed either angry at the rest of the world, angry at each other, or both. The top five books on the New York Times bestseller list the month I started were: *Bush at War* (Bob Woodward’s hagiographic account of the post-9/11 White House); *The Right Man* (Bush’s former speechwriter relives his first year in the White House); *Portrait of a Killer* (Patricia Cornwell on Jack the Ripper); *The Savage Nation* (a rightwing radio talkshow host saves America from “the liberal assault on our borders, language and culture”); and *Leadership* (Republican former New York mayor Rudolph Giuliani’s post 9/11 victory lap).

There has barely been a quiet moment since. First there was the jingoism of the Iraq war, then the re-election of George W Bush in 2004, Hurricane Katrina, disillusionment with the Iraq war, the “Minutemen” anti-immigration vigilantes, the huge pro-immigrant “¡Sí se puede!” protests, Barack Obama, Sarah Palin, the economic crash, Occupy Wall Street, the Tea Party, Obama’s reelection and the current rise in anti-racist activism. Being a foreigner made all these phenomena intriguing. Politically and morally, I picked sides. But, when reporting, it was more like anthropology. I saw it as my mission to try and understand the US: why did poor white people vote against their economic interests? How did the descendants of immigrants become xenophobic? Why were people disappointed in Obama when he had promised so little? The search for the answer was illuminating, even when I never found it or didn’t like it.

But the cultural distance I enjoyed as a Briton in a foreign country felt like a blended veneer of invincibility and invisibility. I thought of myself less as a participant than an onlooker. While reporting from rural Mississippi in 2003, I stopped to ask directions at the house of an old white couple, and they threatened to shoot me. I thought this was funny. I got back into my car sharpish and drove off – but I never once thought they would actually shoot me. How crazy would that be? When I got home, I told my wife and brother-in-law, who are African American. Their parents grew up in the South under segregation; even today, my mother-in-law wouldn’t stop her car in Mississippi for anything but petrol. They didn’t think it was funny at all: what on earth did I think

I was doing, stopping to ask old white folk in rural Mississippi for directions?

Yet, somewhere along the way, I became invested. That was partly about time: as I came to know people – rather than just interviewing them – I came to relate to the issues more intimately. When someone close to you struggles with chronic pain because they have no healthcare, has their kitchen window pierced by gunfire or cannot pay a visit to their home country because they are undocumented, your relationship to issues like health reform, gun control or immigration is transformed. Not because your views change but because knowing and understanding something simply does not provide the same intensity as having it in your life.

But my investment was primarily about circumstances. On the weekend in 2007 that Barack Obama declared his presidential candidacy, our son was born. Six years later, we had a daughter. For the most part I have kept my English accent. But my language relating to children is reflexively American: diapers, strollers, pacifiers, recess, candy and long pants. I have only ever been a parent here – a role for which my own upbringing in England provides no real reference point. One summer evening, a couple years after we moved to Chicago, our daughter was struggling to settle down and so my wife decided to take a short walk to the local supermarket to bob her to sleep in the carrier. On the way back there was shooting in the street and she had to seek shelter in a local barbershop. When the snow finally melted this year one discarded gun was found in the alley behind our local park and another showed up in the alley behind my son's school. My days of being an onlooker were over. I was dealing with daycare, summer camps, schools, doctor's visits, parks and other parents. The day we brought my son home, an article in the New York Times pointed out that in America "a black male who drops out of high school is 60 times more likely to find himself in prison than one with a bachelor's degree". Previously, I'd have found that interesting and troubling. Now it was personal. I had skin in the game. Black skin in a game where the odds are stacked against it.

\* \* \*

**Obama's ascent, I was told by many** and frequently during his campaign, would change these odds. Whenever I asked "How?" no one could say exactly. But his very presence, they insisted, would provide a marker for my son and all who look like him. I never believed that. First of all, one person cannot undo centuries of discrimination, no matter how much nominal power they have. Second, given the institutions into which Obama would be embedded – namely the Democratic party and the presidency – there would only ever be so much he could or would do. He was aspiring to sit atop a system awash with corporate donations in which congressional seats are openly gerrymandered and 41% of the upper chamber can block almost anything. He was the most progressive candidate viable for the presidency, which says a great deal, given the alternatives, but means very little, given what would be needed to significantly shift the dial on such issues as race and inequality.

Pointing this out amid the hoopla of his candidacy made you sound like Eeyore. I was delighted when he won. But somehow I could never be quite as delighted as some people felt I should have been. When Obama beat Hillary Clinton in the South Carolina Democratic primary – in the first southern state to secede from the union, which sparked the civil war, where the Confederate flag still flies above the state capitol and a white supremacist recently gunned down nine parishioners at a black church – the crowds chanted "Race Doesn't Matter". (An odd rallying cry, since it was

precisely because he was a black candidate that they were shouting it; it's not like Hillary's crowd would have shouted the same thing if she had won.)

The symbolic advantages of Obama's election were clear. For two years I pushed my son around in his stroller surrounded by a picture of a black man framed by the words "Hope" and "Change". A year or so after Obama came to office, my son had a playdate with a four-year-old white friend who looked up from his Thomas the Tank Engine and told my son: "You're black." It was a reasonable thing for a child of that age to point out – he was noticing difference, not race. But when my son looked at me for a cue, I now had a new arrow in my quiver to deflect any potential awkwardness. "That's right," I said. "Just like the president."

But the substantial benefits were elusive. Obama inherited an economic crisis that hurt African Americans more than any other community. The discrepancy between black and white employment and wealth grew during his first few years and has barely narrowed since. In 2010, I used this anecdote in a column by way of pointing out the limited symbolic value of having a black president. "True, it is something," I wrote. "But when Thomas is safely back in the station and the moment is over, it is not very much. Because for all the white noise emanating from the Tea Party movement, it has been black Americans who have suffered most since Obama took office. Over the last 14 months the gap between my son's life chances and his friend's have been widening."

This last statement was as undeniably true as it was apparently controversial. I had not claimed that my son was likely to do badly, simply that his odds for success were far worse than the kid he was playing with, and that they were further deteriorating. A study in 2014 found that a black college student has the same chances of getting a job as a white high-school dropout. "As the recession has dragged on," the New York Times pointed out just a couple months before my son's playdate, the disparity between black and white unemployment "has been even more pronounced for those with college degrees, compared with those without. Education, it seems, does not level the playing field – in fact, it appears to have made it more uneven." But insisting that racism would have a material effect on my son's life ruffled some readers' feathers.

"Nonsense," wrote one commenter. "Your middle-class status means his future will have more in common with his white friends than any poor black kid." Another – a Guardian contributor, no less – also chimed in: "For you to claim shared victimhood on skin colour alone is highly disingenuous. Your son is highly likely to do OK, to say the least. He has most of the advantages in the world."

Such responses betrayed complete ignorance about the lived experience of race in a country as segregated as the United States. Class does make a big difference, of course: this is America. We have healthcare, jobs, university educations and a car; we live in a community with reasonable schools, supermarkets and restaurants. In short, we have resources and therefore we have options.

We do not, however, have the option not to be black. And in this time and this place that is no minor factor. That is not "claiming shared victimhood", it is recognising a fact of life. Class offers a range of privileges; but it is not a sealant that protects you from everything else. If it was, rich women would never get raped and wealthy gay couples could marry all around the world.

To even try to have the kind of gilded black life to which these detractors alluded, we would have

to do far more than just revel in our bank accounts and leverage our cultural capital. We would have to live in an area with few other black people, since black neighbourhoods are policed with insufficient respect for life or liberty; send our children to a school with few other black students, since majority-black schools are underfunded; tell them not to wear anything that would associate them with black culture, since doing so would make them more vulnerable to profiling; tell them not to mix with other black children, since they are likely to live in the very areas and go to the very schools from which we would be trying to escape; and not let the children go out after dark, since being young and black after sunset makes the police suspect that you have done or are about to do something.

The list could go on. None of this self-loathing behaviour would provide any guarantees, of course. Racism does what it says on the packet; it discriminates against people on the grounds of race. It can be as arbitrary in its choice of victim as it is systemic in its execution. And while it never works alone (but in concert with class, gender and a host of other rogue characters), it can operate independently. No one is going to be checking my bank account or professional status when they are looking at my kids.

Trayvon Martin was walking through a gated community when George Zimmerman pegged him for a thug and shot him dead. Clementa Pinckney, a South Carolina state senator, was in one of Charleston's most impressive churches when Dylann Roof murdered him and eight others.

I have not only never met an African American who thought they could buy themselves the advantages of a white American; I have yet to meet one who thinks they can even buy themselves out of the disadvantages of being black. All you can do is limit the odds. And when one in three black boys born in 2001 is destined for the prison system, those odds are pretty bad. Having a black man in the White House has not changed that.

\* \* \*

**Most days, the park closest to us** looks like Sesame Street. White, black and Vietnamese American kids climbing, swinging and sliding. Occasionally, particularly late on weekday afternoons, teenagers show up. Like adolescents the western world over, they are bored, broke, horny and lost. They don't want to stay at home, but can't afford to be anywhere that costs money, and so they come to the public space most approximate to their needs, where they squeeze into swings that are meant for smaller kids and joke, flirt and banter. Very occasionally they swear and get a little rowdy – but nothing that an adult could not deal with by simply asking them to keep the language down because there are little kids around. Oh, and in this park the teenagers are usually black.

Their presence certainly changes the mood. But the only time it ever really gets tense is when the police come. The better police chat with them, the worse ones interrogate them. Either way, the presence of armed, uniformed people in this children's space is both unsettling and unnecessary. The smaller kids and those new to the park imagine something seriously wrong must have happened for the police to be there; the older ones (by which I mean those aged seven and over), and those who are already familiar with the drill just shrug: the cops are in our park again. It is difficult to tell which response is worse.

Once, when some adolescents were hanging out relatively quietly one afternoon, I struck up a conversation with a white woman. Her son was roughly the same age as mine, we both lived nearby and neither of our kids would have to cross a road to get to the park. We were discussing at what age we thought it would be appropriate to let our boys come by themselves. “The thing is, you just don’t know if it’s going to be quiet or if the junior gangbangers are going to be hanging around,” she said, gesturing to the youths on the swings.

I was stunned. Whenever I have written about police killings at least one reader reminds me that black people are most likely to be killed by black people. This is both true and irrelevant. First, because all Americans are overwhelmingly likely to be killed by assailants of their own race, so what some brand “black-on-black crime” should, more accurately, just be called crime. But also because black people are not, by dint of their melanin content, entrusted to protect and serve the public. The police are. Over the last decade I have reported from many impoverished neighbourhoods, populated by all races, where I have felt unsafe. That hasn’t made me fear black people or any other racial group; it has just made me loathe poverty and gun culture in general, since it is that toxic combination that both drives the crime and makes it lethal.

This woman and I were looking at the same kids but seeing quite different things.

“What makes you think they’re going to become gangbangers?” I asked. She shrugged. The conversation pretty much dried up after that.

There is a section of white society – a broad section that includes affable mothers who will speak to black strangers like me in the park – who understand black kids as an inherent threat. Beyond the segregated ghettos where few white people venture, the presence of black youth apparently marks not just the potential for trouble but the arrival of it. When George Zimmerman saw Trayvon Martin, he didn’t see a 17-year-old boy walking home from the store. He saw someone “real suspicious”, “up to no good”, whom he assumed bore some responsibility for recent burglaries.

“Fucking punks,” he told the police, referring to Trayvon. “These assholes, they always get away.”

Indeed black children are often not even regarded as children at all. In Goose Creek, South Carolina, police demanded DNA samples from two middle school students after they were mistaken for a 32-year-old suspect. After the killing of Tamir Rice – the 12-year-old shot dead by police in Cleveland after someone reported him brandishing what they assumed was a “probably fake” gun – a police spokesman said it was his own fault. “Tamir Rice is in the wrong,” he said. “He’s menacing. He’s 5ft 7in, 191 pounds. He wasn’t that little kid you’re seeing in pictures. He’s a 12-year-old in an adult body.” When testifying before the grand jury into the shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Darren Wilson described his assailant more like an animal than a 18-year-old: “He looked up at me and had the most intense aggressive face. The only way I can describe it, it looks like a demon, that’s how angry he looked.” Even after Wilson shot Brown he continued to depict him as both physically superhuman and emotionally subhuman. “He was almost bulking up to run through the shots, like it was making him mad that I’m shooting him. And the face that he had was looking straight through me, like I wasn’t even there, I wasn’t even anything in his way.”

The evidence is not merely anecdotal. A study last year published in the American Psychological

Association's online Journal of Personality and Social Psychology revealed that white Americans overestimated the age of black boys over the age of 10 by an average of four and a half years; white respondents also assumed that black children were more culpable than whites or Latinos, particularly when the boys were matched with serious crimes. "Children in most societies are considered to be in a distinct group with characteristics such as innocence and the need for protection," wrote Phillip Atiba Goff PhD, of the University of California, Los Angeles. "Our research found that black boys can be seen as responsible for their actions at an age when white boys still benefit from the assumption that children are essentially innocent." My son is tall for his age; these are the things you worry about.

It wasn't long before my wife and I began to notice the degree to which some white adults felt entitled to shout at black children – be it in the street, or on school trips – for infractions either minor or imagined.

Last summer, on the afternoon I arrived home from reporting on the disturbances after Michael Brown's death in Ferguson, Missouri, there was a barbecue and music at the local park. I took the kids. The park has a water feature that shoots wet jets from the ground and sprays kids in fountains from all sides as they paddle around. The younger ones peel down to their underwear while the older ones just pile in whatever they have on. It was a scorching day and my son and several other kids were having a water fight – a tame affair with very little collateral damage for those not involved beyond the odd sprinkling. At one stage, while in hot pursuit of his main rival, my son splashed a woman on her leg. She yelled at him as though he'd hit her with a brick.

I'd seen the whole thing and ran over.

"What's the problem?" I said.

"Look. He's covered me in water," she shouted.

I looked. She was barely wet. But even if he had ...

"You're standing in a children's park, on a hot day, next to a water feature," I said. "Deal with it. Just stop shouting at him."

"Don't you tell me what to do," she barked.

"Now you're shouting at me," I said. "Just stop it."

"Who the hell are you?" she yelled.

"I'm his dad that's who."

"You're nobody, that's who you are," she bellowed. "Nobody."

\* \* \*

**One of the first stories I covered** on my arrival was the funeral of Mamie Till Mobley, the 81-year-old mother of the late Emmett Till. In 1955 Mamie sent her 14-year-old son, Emmett, from Chicago to rural Mississippi to spend his summer holiday with family. She packed him off with a

warning: “If you have to get on your knees and bow when a white person goes past,” she told him, “do it willingly.”

Emmett didn't follow her advice. While in the small town of Money, in the Delta region, he either said “Bye, baby” or wolf-whistled at a white woman in a grocery store. Three days later his body was fished out of the Tallahatchie river with a bullet in his skull, an eye gouged out and his forehead crushed on one side.

Raising a black child in a racist society poses a very particular set of challenges. On the one hand, you want them to be proud and confident of who they are. On the other, you have to teach them that they are vulnerable precisely because of who they are, in the knowledge that awareness of that vulnerability just might save their life. We are trying to raise self-confident children for long lives, not hashtags for slaughter.

Explaining the complex historical and social forces that make such a dance necessary is not easy at the best of times. Making them comprehensible to a child is nigh impossible without gross simplifications and cutting corners. Once, during our 10-minute walk to daycare, my son asked if we could take another route. “Why?” I asked.

“Because that way they stop all the black boys,” he said.

He was right. Roughly twice a week we would pass young black men being frisked or arrested, usually on the way home. He was also four, and until that point I was not aware that he had even noticed. I tried to make him feel safe.

“Well don't worry. You're with me and they're not going to stop us,” I told him.

“Why not?” he asked.

“Because we haven't done anything,” I said.

“What have they done?” he asked.

He had me. From then on we took another route.

When I interviewed Maya Angelou in 2002, she told me that the September 11 attacks of the previous year were understood differently by African Americans. “Living in a state of terror was new to many white people in America,” she said. “But black people have been living in a state of terror in this country for more than 400 years.” It is that state of terror that has been laid bare these last few years.

The American polity and media episodically “discovers” this daily reality in much the same way that teenagers discover sex – urgently, earnestly, voraciously and carelessly, with great self-indulgence but precious little self-awareness. They have always been aware of it but somehow when confronted with it, it nonetheless takes them by surprise.

The week I arrived, in December 2002, the Senate minority leader, Mississippi Republican Trent Lott, resigned from his leadership position after he said in a speech that America would have been

a better place had the segregationist Strom Thurmond won the presidency in 1948. The mainstream media saw nothing outrageous in this – as if it was just the kind of thing a conservative southern senator might say. It took bloggers to make it a story. As I write, some southern states are debating whether to keep the Confederate flag flying on state grounds in various guises – as though it took nine people dying on their doorstep to understand its racist connotations.

It is as though the centuries-old narrative of racial inequality is too tiresome to acknowledge, except as a footnote, until it appears in dramatic fashion, as it did after Hurricane Katrina or the protests in Ferguson. At that point the bored become suddenly scandalised. In a nation that prides itself on always moving forward, the notion that they are “still dealing with this” feels like an affront to the national character. That’s why Obama’s candidacy had such a simple and uplifting appeal to so many Americans. As the radical academic and 1970s icon Angela Davis explained to me in 2007, it represented “a model of diversity as the difference that makes no difference, the change that brings about no change”.

This most recent episode of racial awakening has lasted longer than most. For the last couple of years the brutal banality of daily life for some people in this country has become visible and undeniable to those who have no immediate connection to it. But nothing new has happened. There has been no spike in police brutality. What’s new is that people are looking. And thanks to new technology (namely the democratisation of the ability to film and distribute), they have lots to look at. As a result, a significant section of white America is outraged at the sight of what it had previously chosen to ignore, while a dwindling but still sizeable and vocal few still refuse to believe their eyes.

\* \* \*

**I’ve never found it particularly useful** to compare racisms – as though one manifestation might be better than another. Every society, regardless of its racial composition, has overlapping and interweaving hierarchies. Insisting on the superiority of one over another suggests there are racisms out there worth having – a race to the bottom with no moral centre.

In June 1998, as the public inquiry into the murder of Stephen Lawrence laid bare one of the more insidious examples of British racism, news arrived from Jasper, Texas, about the murder of James Byrd. Byrd, an African American, had been picked up by three men, one of whom he knew and two of whom were white supremacists. Instead of driving him home, they took him to a remote country road, beat him, urinated on him and chained him by his ankles to their pickup truck before dragging him for more than a mile until his head came off. Then they went for a barbecue.

The next day, during an editorial meeting at the Guardian which featured a discussion of the Lawrence inquiry followed by the Byrd murder, one of my colleagues remarked, of Byrd’s killing: “Well at least we don’t do that here.”

“That will be of little comfort to Doreen and Neville Lawrence,” I thought.

I have more cousins in the US than in Britain. They are doing fine. At one stage I fully intended to immigrate here. While that plan no longer stands, it still doesn’t strike me as insane.

While I have been in America, I have not been shot at, arrested, imprisoned or otherwise seriously inconvenienced by the state. I do not live in the hollowed out, jobless zones of urban economic despair to which many African Americans have been abandoned. I have been shouted at in a park, taken different routes to school, and occasionally dealt with bigoted officials. (While driving through Mississippi to cover Katrina I approached a roadblock that all the other journalists had easily passed through, only to have a policeman pat the gun in his holster and turn me around). These experiences are aggravating. They are not life-threatening.

I am not Michael Brown. But then Michael Brown wasn't Michael Brown before he was shot dead and had his body left on the street for four hours; Eric Garner was just a man trying to sell cigarettes in the street before he was choked to death in Staten Island; Tamir Rice was just a boisterous kid acting out in a park before a policeman leaped out of his squad car and shot him within seconds. Being shot dead by the police or anyone else is not the daily experience of black people in America.

But what became clear following the Department of Justice report into the Ferguson police force was just how extreme and commonplace these aggravations could be. To cite just a few examples: between 2007 to 2014, one woman in Ferguson was arrested twice, spent six days in jail and paid \$550 as a result of one parking ticket for which she was originally charged \$151. She tried to pay in smaller instalments - \$25 or \$50 a time - but the court refused to accept anything less than the full payment, which she could not afford. Seven years after the original infraction she still owed \$541 – this was how the town raised its revenue. It was not a glitch in the system; it was the system.

Then there was the 14-year-old boy that the Ferguson police found in an abandoned building, who was chased down by a dog that bit his ankle and his left arm as he protected his face. The boy says officers kicked him in the head and then laughed about it after. The officers say they thought he was armed; he wasn't. Department of Justice investigators found that every time a police dog in Ferguson bit someone, the victim was black.

Then there was the man pulled out of his house by the police after reports of an altercation inside. As they dragged him out he told them: "You don't have a reason to lock me up."

"Nigger, I can find something to lock you up on," the officer told him.

"Good luck with that," the man responded. The officer slammed the man's face into a wall and he fell to the floor.

"Don't pass out, motherfucker, because I'm not carrying you to my car," the officer is claimed to have said.

This was the same month Brown was killed. Were it not for the disturbances following Brown's death, there would have been no investigation – not only would we have heard nothing of these things but, because no light had been shone on them, the Ferguson police would be carrying on with the same level of impunity. This was a small midwestern suburb few had heard of – unremarkable in every way, which is precisely what makes the goings on there noteworthy. If it was happening there, then it could be happening anywhere.

It is exhausting. When the videos of brutality go viral I can't watch them unless I have to write about them. I don't need to be shocked – which is just as well because these videos emerge with such regularity that they cease to be shocking. Were it not for the thrill of seeing an unjaded younger generation reviving the best of the nation's traditions of anti-racist resistance, I would be in despair.

The altercations in the park, the rerouted walks to school, the aggravations of daily life are the lower end of a continuum – a dull drumbeat that occasionally crescendos into violent confrontation and even social conflagration. As spring turns to summer the volume keeps ratcheting up.

“Terror,” the anthropologist Arjun Appadurai writes in his book *Fear of Small Numbers*, “is first of all the terror of the next attack.” The terrorism resides not just in the fact that it happens, but that one is braced for the possibility that it could happen to you at any moment. Seven children and teenagers are shot on an average day in the US. I have just finished writing a book in which I take a random day and interview the families and friends of those who perished. Ten young people died the day I chose. Eight were black. All of the black parents said they had assumed this could happen to their son.

As one bereaved dad told me: “You wouldn't be doing your job as a father if you didn't.”

● Follow the Long Read on Twitter: @gdnlongread

More features

## Topics

Race issues

US politics

US policing