

# JEFFERSON EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

## Wakin' Us Up

### The Story of Amadou Diallo

By Tanya Teglo  
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*Editor's Note: Following is the fourth in a series of articles by writer Tanya Teglo on African American culture and social issues. The articles were first published as part of the 2021 Erie Blues & Jazz Festival.*

The issue of police brutality took a turn in 1999. The issue of racial profiling began to be widely debated in circles as a different form of discrimination and prejudice. Issues also arose around the definition of deadly force. The definition of deadly force and when it should be applied is defined on [Cornell's University's law website](#). Some of the controversy surrounding the use of deadly force comes into being because it is left up to a law enforcement officer to decide when to employ the use of this tactic while making split-second decisions. For example:

Self-Defense. When deadly force reasonably appears to be necessary to protect a protective force officer who reasonably believes himself or herself to be in imminent danger of death or serious bodily harm. ... Apprehension. When deadly force reasonably appears to be necessary to apprehend or prevent the escape of a person reasonably believed to: (i) have committed an offense of the nature specified in paragraphs (a)(1) through (a)(4) 1 of this section; or (ii) be escaping by use of a weapon or explosive or who otherwise indicates that he or she poses a significant threat of death or serious bodily harm to the protective force officer or others unless apprehended without delay. (Cornell Law School Legal Information Institute, 10 CFR § 1047.7 - Use of deadly force, can be found [here](#)).

When discussing the deadly force issue, one should keep in mind that the standards aren't always clear and the pressure of making life or death decisions in a second has to be one of the most stressful one could ever make. In his song, ["The Weight of the Badge,"](#) Country Legend George Strait discusses the pressure that the average police officer is constantly under. "[He] Lays his life on the line, And the line he walks is razor-fine." Strait continues to highlight the pressures that average police officers feel once they put their badge on, "It doesn't weigh a lot until you put it on, And the weight of it is staggering, Then duty calls each time, He knows he's gotta answer." [1]

This use of deadly force has led to many controversial cases in which these tactics were applied. One of the most notable prior to the turn of the century was the shooting of Amadou Diallo. Jane Fritsch reported:

Diallo, the immigrant from Guinea who was fired on 41 times as he stood, unarmed, in the vestibule of his apartment building in the Bronx. ... The shooting occurred about 12:40 a.m. on Feb. 4, 1999, when the four officers, all in street clothes, approached Mr. Diallo on the stoop of his building and fired 41 shots, striking him 19 times, as he retreated inside. The officers, who are white, said they had thought he had a gun. It turned out to be a wallet. ... The verdict came in a tense and racially charged case that led to anti-police demonstrations, arrests and a reorganization of the department's Street Crime Unit, to which the officers belonged. (The officers were all found not guilty)" (Jane Fritsch, *New York Times*, [The Diallo Verdict: The Overview; 4 Officers in Diallo Shooting Acquitted of all Charges.](#), February 26, 2000)

In response to the verdict, Bruce Springsteen released the song, "American Skin: 41 Shots" in 2001:

41 shots, and we'll take that ride  
Cross the bloody river to the other side  
41 shots, cut through the night.  
You're kneeling over his body in the vestibule  
Praying for his life. Lena gets her son ready for school.  
She says, 'On these streets, Charles  
You've got to understand the rules  
If an officer stops you, promise me  
you'll always be polite  
And that you'll never ever run away.  
Promise Mama you'll keep your hands in sight.'  
Is it a gun (is it a gun), is it a knife  
(is it a knife) Is it a wallet (is it a wallet),  
this is your life (this is your life).  
It ain't no secret (it ain't no secret).  
It ain't no secret (it ain't no secret).  
No secret my friend. You can get killed  
just for living in your American skin  
(Bruce Springsteen, ["American Skin: 41 Shots,"](#) 2001)

In an interview with Robert Hillburn, Springsteen explained his purpose in writing and recording this song:

It felt to me like the most necessary issue to deal with at the turn of the century was the question of race in America and how we deal with one another. To some degree, the answer to that question is going to decide a lot about how the nation as a whole eventually rises or falls. I wanted to point out that people of color are viewed through a veil of criminality and that ultimately means they are thought of as somehow less American than other Americans, therefore people with less rights.... Not just by law enforcement but the guy behind the counter at the convenience store and whoever. The first verse is about people trying to cross the river of race, and how the river is tainted with blood. The second verse is about a mother sending her child to school, having to give very specific instructions about how to act. It's so painful for her because most people assume their children will be safe, but she can't make that assumption. She knows the slightest movement or slightest misunderstanding could mean the end of your life. (Bruce Springsteen quoted in, ["Under The Boss' Skin,"](#) found in *Los Angeles Times*, April 1, 2001)

Springsteen faced unexpected backlash for the song. Dave Lifton of Ultimate Classic Rock reported that the singer faced criticism by various organizations that were supported offshoots of law enforcement. Lifton wrote:

PBA President Patrick J. Lynch wrote a letter to the association's members.

'The title seems to suggest that the shooting of Amadou Diallo was a case of racial profiling — which keeps repeating the phrase, 'Forty-one shots,' it read. 'I consider it an outrage that he would be trying to fatten his wallet by reopening the wounds of this tragic case at a time when police officers and community members are in a healing period.'[2]

The healing process that Patrick J. Lynch referred to existed only in the effort made by Howard Safir to hire 50 minority police officers and conduct investigations to see if minority rights were violated. [3] Lynch was further angered:

He also “strongly urge[d]” that officers neither attend the concert nor moonlight as security at any of his shows. Lynch wasn't the only one upset. New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani and Police Commissioner Howard Safir also condemned Springsteen, while Bob Lucente, the president of the New York chapter of the Fraternal Order of Police, took things a step further by referring to the singer as a “dirtbag” and a “floating fag.” (Ultimate Classic Rock, [20 Years Ago: Bruce Springsteen Angers the Police Department, June 8, 2015](#))

Kadiatou Diallo, the mother Amadou Diallo, disagreed with the idea in 2015 that New York City had healed, or much change had taken place. In an interview with Ese Olumhense of Nymag.com, Kadiatou commented:

'Every year, I'm comforting another family,' she told THE CITY. 'I know one mother from Guinea also who had her son killed by the NYPD. I comforted her, I comforted other moms, like Eric Garner's mom and Sean Bell's mother. Every year, all these families,' Kadiatou Diallo said. ... Losing a child — I don't wish that to any mother,' she said. 'Unfortunately, many have had to go through that pain like me, having to see their children be killed in a very, very similar way. It's not something that you can remove and put aside. No. It's always with you, you live with it, you breathe with that, you sleep with that, you wake up with the bad feeling. I don't care how many years pass, if you live 20 years later, like me, or 50 years later, like other moms. It's the same.' (Kadiatou Diallo quoted in *The Intelligencer*)

Sadly, incidents like the Amadou Diallo case did not end. Throughout the 2000s, many more incidents like it occurred. Some of the most widely known instances of the use of racial profiling that had deadly consequences were the cases involving Eric Garner, Trayvon Martin, Brionna Taylor, George Floyd, and many others. It turns out the lyrics of the song “American Skin” would have a further lasting impact beyond the Diallo incident.

Springsteen was right to share the worry about what mothers had to teach their sons regarding how to carry themselves and act in front of the police, even if they were young teenagers. The Tamir Rice case served as a prime example. Rice was a 12-year-old boy who was in a park in Cleveland, Ohio playing with an airsoft gun but to a passersby it looked like he was waving a gun around, scaring people, according to the 911 call. The caller stated that the gun was “probably a fake.” When the officers arrived on the scene, they told the boy to raise his hands, but the boy didn't listen to the command and, according to Emma G. Fitzsimmons of the *New York Times*, the boy reached for the airsoft gun in his waistband. As a result, the officers fired at him twice.[4]

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*Author and historian Tanya Teglo specializes in African American history. She has written articles for many academic journals, including “Nat D. Williams: Beale Street Historian” for the West Tennessee Historical Society Papers, as well as “WDIA and the Black Press: A Powerful Partnership” for the Tennessee Historical Quarterly. Teglo has also spent many years serving the disabled community, having been a member of various committees and workgroups in Pennsylvania government dealing with disability policy. In addition to writing and research, she has taken an active role in assisting her alma mater, Edinboro University of Pennsylvania, in enhancing its disability services.*

## End Notes

[1] George Strait, “Weight of The Badge,” *Honkey Tonk Time Machine*, 2019.

[2] Patrick J. Lynch quoted in “20 Years Ago: Bruce Springsteen Angers the New York Police Department”

[3] Michael Grunwald, “Trial Puts Giuliani, NYPD on Defensive” *The Washington Post*, March 30<sup>th</sup>, 1999. A2

[4] Emma G. Fitzsimmons “12-Year-Old Boy Dies After Police in Cleveland Shoot Him” *New York Times* November 23, 2014 accessed [here](#)

## In Case You Missed It

[Book Notes #89: From Roman Fertility Ritual to Hallmark Moment: A Brief History of Valentine’s Day & Valentine Verse \(Part Two\)](#) written by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence Dr. Andrew Roth

[The Big Chill: A Neighborhood Glacier?](#) written by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence Dr. David Frew

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