



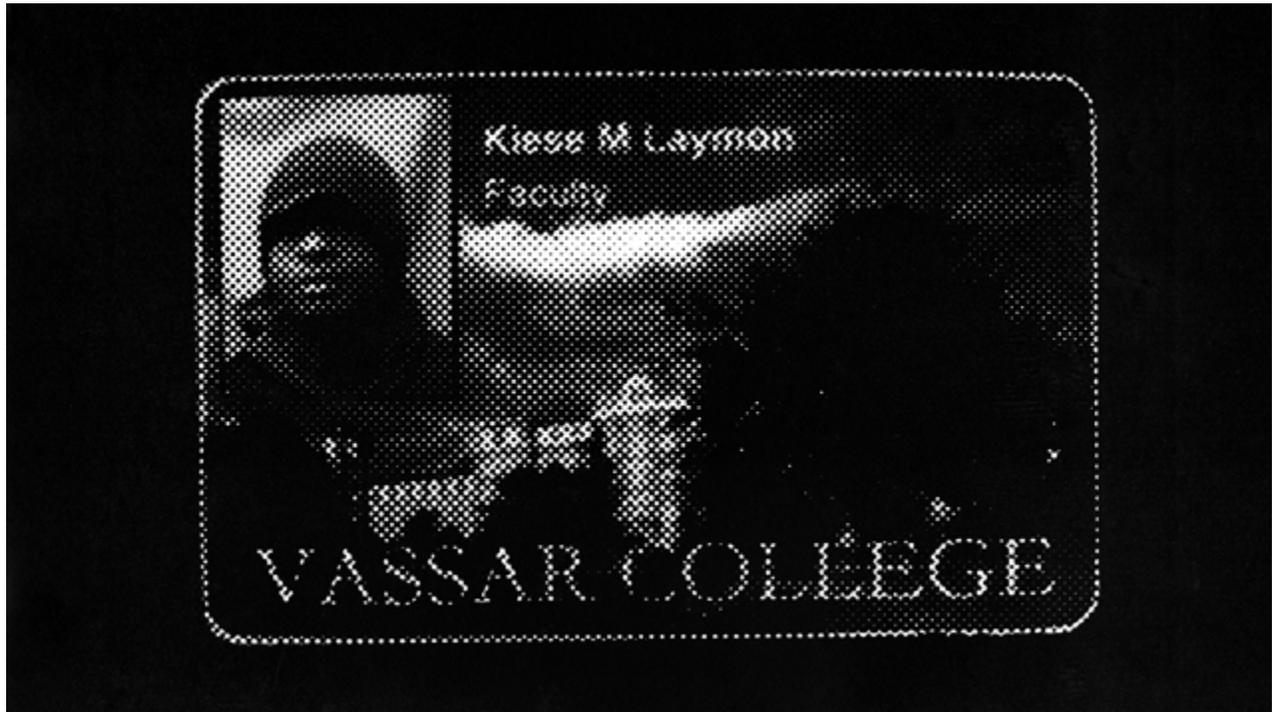
# My Vassar College Faculty ID Makes Everything OK



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The fourth time a Poughkeepsie police officer told me that my Vassar College Faculty ID could make everything OK was three years ago. I was driving down Wilbur Avenue. When the white police officer, whose head was way too small for his neck, asked if my truck was stolen, I laughed, said no, and shamefully showed him my license and my ID, just like [Lanre Akinsiku](#). The ID, which ensures that I can spend the rest of my life in a lush state park with fat fearless

squirrels, surrounded by enlightened white folks who love talking about Jon Stewart, Obama, and **civility**, has been washed so many times it doesn't lie flat.

After taking my license and ID back to his car, the police officer came to me with a ticket and two lessons. "Looks like you got a good thing going on over there at Vassar College," he said. "You don't wanna it ruin it by rolling through stop signs, do you?"

I sucked my teeth, shook my head, kept my right hand visibly on my right thigh, rolled my window up, and headed back to campus.

One more ticket.

Two more condescending lessons from a lame armed with white racial supremacy, anti-blackness, a gun, and a badge. But at least I didn't get arrested.

Or shot eight times.

My Vassar College Faculty ID made everything okay. A little over two hours later, I sat in a closed room on Vassar's campus in a place called Main Building.

In the center of my ID, standing dusty orange and partially hidden by shadows of massive trees, is a picture of Vassar College's Main Building. Black women students took the building over in 1969 to demand, among other things, that the administration affirmatively reckon with its investment in anti-blackness and white racial supremacy. A multiracial group of students led by Cleon Edwards occupied Main again in 1990, after Daniel Patrick Moynihan reportedly told a Jamaican Dutchess County official, "If you don't like it in this country, why don't you pack your bags and go back where you came from?"

I sat in a room in Main that day with a senior professor and two high-ranking administrators. We were having one of those meetings you're not supposed to

talk about. Near the end of the meeting, this senior professor affirmed his/her commitment to “African Americans” and said I was a “fraud.”

I tucked both hands underneath my buttocks, rested my left knuckle beneath my ID as tears pooled in the gutters of both eyes. I’d been hungry before. I’d been beaten. I’d had guns pulled on me. I never felt as pathetic, angry, and terrified as I felt in that room.

I came into that meeting knowing that the illest part of racial terror in this nation is that it’s sanctioned by sorry overpaid white bodies that will never be racially terrorized and maintained by a few desperate underpaid black and brown bodies that will. I left that meeting knowing that there are few things more shameful than being treated like a nigger by—and under the gaze of—intellectually and imaginatively average white Americans who are not, and will never have to be, half as good at their jobs as you are at yours.

I sat in that meeting thinking about the first day I got my ID. It was nine years earlier and I remember walking to the gym, maybe 100 yards behind Main Building and being asked by a white boy in yellow flip-flops if I could sell him some weed.

I just looked at his flip-flops.

And he just looked at my black neck. And when I told him that I taught English, he contorted his bushy brow, said “Word,” and trotted off.

Later that year, maybe 30 yards to the left of Main Building, security routinely entered my office asking for my ID despite my name on the door and pictures of me, my Mama, and them all over my desk. In that same building, one floor lower, after I got my first book deal, I was told by another senior white member of my department that it was “all right” if I spoke to him “in ebonics,” Later that

year, a white senior professor walked in at the end of one of my classes and told me, in front of my students, “Don’t talk back to me.”

I wanted to put my palm through this man’s esophagus and burn that building down, but I thought about prison and my Grandmama’s health care. So I cussed his ass out and went about the business of eating too much fried cheese and biscuits at a local buffet.

A few summers later, right in front of Main Building, two security guards stopped me for walking past the President’s house without identification. They threatened to call the Poughkeepsie police on me. I told the officers, “Fuck you” and “Show me your ID” for a number of reasons, but mostly because I’d sold one of them a car a few years ago, and Vassar’s security officers don’t carry guns.

Like nearly every black person I know from the deep South who has one of these faculty ID’s, I anticipated reckoning daily with white racial supremacy at my job.

But.

I didn’t expect to smell the crumbling of a real human heart when I went to the police station to get my student, Mat, who had been missing for days. Mat was a beautiful Southern black boy suffering from bipolar disorder.

I didn’t anticipate hearing the hollowed terror and shame in my student Rachel’s voice at 2 in the morning after she was arrested by Poughkeepsie police for jaywalking while her white friends just watched. Rachel went to jail that night.

I didn’t expect to feel the cold cracked hands of administrators when we pushed

the college to allow Jade, a black Phi Beta Kappa student from DC, back into school after they suspended her for a full year for verbally intimidating her roommate.

I didn't expect to taste my own tears when watching three black women seniors tell two heads of security and the Dean of the College that they, and another Asian American woman, deserve to not have security called on them for being black women simply doing their laundry and reading books on a Sunday afternoon. I didn't expect the Dean of the College and the heads of security to do absolutely nothing after this meeting.

I didn't expect to have to wrap my arms around Leo, a Chicano student who stood shivering and sobbing in front of Poughkeepsie police after getting jumped on Raymond Ave by kids he called "my own people." Didn't expect to take him to the police station and have the questioning officer ask Leo, "Why do you use the term 'Latino'? Can you tell me what country the boys who jumped you were from?" The officer told Leo that his partner was Colombian and could tell where a person was from just by looking at them. Leo told me that he felt "most Chicano, most Latino, and most like a Vassar student" that night.

I didn't expect that.

I didn't expect to see my student Orion, a black boy from Boston, sitting palms down on the sidewalk in front of a police car a few Thursdays ago on my way from the gym. I got in the face of the two interrogating officers telling them, "He didn't do nothing" and "Leave my student the fuck alone," when I found out he was being accused of trying to steal a security golf cart.

I didn't expect the same two security guards who'd stopped me for walking in front of the President's house to tell the officers interrogating Orion that the golf cart was theirs and Orion was "a good kid, a Vassar student" who was just going

to get a slice of pizza.

By the time one of the heads of Vassar security, in the presence of the current Dean of the College, told one of my colleagues and me that there was “no racial profiling on campus” and that we were making the black and brown students say there was, I expected almost everything.

I expected that four teenage black boys from Poughkeepsie would have security called on them for making too much noise in the library one Sunday afternoon. I expected security to call Poughkeepsie police on these 15 and 16-year-olds when a few of them couldn't produce an ID. I expected police to drive on the lawn in front of the library, making a spectacle of these black boys' perceived guilt.

A few days after Vassar called police on those children, a police officer visited one of the boys while he was in class and questioned him about some stolen cell phones and iPods at Vassar. When the kid said he didn't know anything about any stolen cell phones, the officer told the 15-year-old black child, who might have applied to Vassar in three years, to never go back to Vassar College again.

I didn't expect that.

Vassar College, the place that issues my faculty ID, a place so committed to access and what they call **economic diversity**, did its part to ensure that a black Poughkeepsie child, charged with nothing, would forever be a part of the justice system for walking through a library without an ID.

There is no way on earth that a 15-year-old child visited by police officers at his school for walking through a local college library while black is going to be OK.

And neither are we.

But.

My Vassar College Faculty ID affords me free smoothies, free printing paper, paid leave, and access to one of the most beautiful libraries on Earth. It guarantees that I have really good health care and more disposable income than anyone in my Mississippi family. But way more than I want to admit, I'm wondering what price we pay for these kinds of ID's, and what that price has to do with the extrajudicial disciplining and killing of young cis and trans black human beings.

You have a Michigan State Faculty ID, and seven-year old Aiyana Stanley-Jones was killed in a police raid. You have a Wilberforce University Faculty ID and 12-year-old Tamir Rice was shot dead by police for holding a BB gun. I have a Vassar College Faculty ID and NYPD suffocated Shereese Francis while she lay face-down on a mattress. You have a University of Missouri Student ID and Mike Brown's unarmed 18-year-old black body lay dead in the street for four and a half hours.

But.

"We are winning," my mentor, Adisa Ajamu, often tells me. "Improvisation, transcendence, and resilience—the DNA of the Black experience—are just synonyms for fighting preparedness for the long winter of war."

Adisa is right. But to keep winning, to keep our soul and sanity in this terror-filled coliseum, at some point we have to say fuck it. We have to say fuck them. And most importantly, we must say to people and communities that love us, "I love you. Will you please love me? I'm listening."

We say that most profoundly with our work. We say that most profoundly with our lives. The question is, can we mean what we must say with our work and our

lives and continue working at institutions like Vassar College.

Listening to our people and producing rigorous, soulful work are not antithetical. My teachers: Noel Didla, Paula Madison, Brittney Cooper, Rosa Clemente, Osagyefo Sekou, Eve Dunbar, Imani Perry, Darnell Moore, Josie Duffy, Kimberle Crenshaw, Mark Anthony Neal, Mychal Denzel Smith, dream hampton, Regina Bradley, Marlon Peterson, Jamilah LeMieux, Luke Harris, Chanda Hsu Prescod-Weinstein, and Carlos Alamo show me this everyday.

They also show me that though there's an immense price to pay in and out of so-called elite American educational institutions, the depth of this price differs based on sexuality, gender, race, access to wealth, and the status of one's dependents.

I paid the price of having sorry gatekeepers at Vassar question the validity of my book contracts, question my graduation from undergrad, question my graduation from grad school, question whether or not I was given tenure as opposed to earning it. And like you, when questioned so much, of course I outworked them, but scars accumulated in battles won sometimes hurt more than battles lost.

I gained 129 pounds. I got sick. I kept hurting someone who would have never hurt me. I rarely slept.

I kept fighting. And praying. And I got my work out. And I worked on healing. And I taught my kids. And I served my community. And I got hit again. And I swung at folks who weren't even swinging at me. And my best friend, who was also reckoning with the "Vassar" part of her Vassar Faculty ID, and I took turns lying to each other, sealing off our hearts in favor of arguments and unpaid labor. And when I earned leaves that I should have spent at home in Forest, Mississippi, with the 85 year-old woman who gave me the skills of

improvisation, transcendence, and resilience, I stayed at Vassar College and guided tons of independent studies, directed flailing programs, helped incompetent administrators do their jobs, and chaired hollow committees.

My family needed me home. My soul needed to be there. But I was afraid to be somewhere where my Vassar College Faculty ID didn't matter worth a damn. I was afraid to let the Mississippi black folks who really got me over see all my new stretch marks, afraid they'd hear the isolation and anxiety in my voice, afraid they'd find the crumpled bank receipts from money taken out at casinos. I was afraid to show my Mama, Auntie, and Grandma that I felt alone and so much sadder than the 27-year-old black boy they remember being issued a Vassar College Faculty ID 12 years ago.

OK.

A half an inch below my name on my bent ID is a nine digit identification number, and in the top left corner, hanging in the blue sky, is a 27-year-old black boy wearing an emerald green hoodie. An army green sweater-hat cocked slightly to the left is pulled over my eyes. A black book bag is slung across my right shoulder.

When I took the picture of that ID, I felt so healthy. I felt so worthy of good love. I didn't feel delivered but I felt proud that I could take care of my Mississippi family. I felt that every beating I'd gotten with shoes, extension cords, switches, belts, belt buckles, fists, and the guns of police officers was worth it. I knew that our mamas and grandmamas and aunties beat us to remind us that there was a massive price to pay for being black, free, and imperfect. I knew they beat us partially so that we would one day have a chance to wield ID's like mine as a weapon and a shield.

Twelve years after getting my Vassar College faculty ID, I sit here and know that

the nation can't structurally and emotionally assault black children and think they're going to turn out OK.

Vassar College can't structurally assault and neglect black children and think they're going to turn out OK.

I can't personally assault and neglect black children and think they're going to turn out OK.

I think about time travel and regret a lot. If I could go back and tell my Mama anything, I would tell her that I love her, and I thank her, and I see her and I know that white racial supremacy, poverty, heteropatriarchy, and a lifetime as a young black woman academic with a hardheaded son are whupping her ass, but black parents can't physically and emotionally assault their black children—even in an attempt to protect them from the worst of white folks—and think they are going to turn out OK.

We are not OK. We are not OK. We have to get better at organizing, strategizing, and patiently loving us because the people who issued my Vassar College ID, like the people who issued Darren Wilson and Robert McCulloch their badges, will never ever give a fuck about the inside of our lives.

I have a Vassar College Faculty ID. I write books that some people care about. I teach my students. I take care of my Grandma. I have more access to healthy choice than most of my cousins. And I, like a lot of you, am not OK. I am not subhuman. I am not superhuman. I am not a demon. I cannot walk through bullets. I am not a special nigger. I am not a fraud. I am not OK.

But.

Unlike Mike Brown and Aiyana Stanley-Jones and Tamir Rice, I am alive. We

are alive.

And.

We are so much better than the sick part of our nation that murders an unarmed black boy like a rabid dog, before prosecuting him for being a nigger. We are so much better than powerful academic institutions, slick prosecutors, and the *innocent* practitioners of white racial supremacy in this nation who really believe that a handful of niggers with some special IDs, and a scar(r)ed black President on the wrong side of history, are proof of their—and really, our own—terrifying deliverance from American evil.

***Kiese Laymon**, born and raised in Jackson, Mississippi, is the author of **How to Slowly Kill Yourself and Others in America** and the novel Long Division. He has two new books, a novel called And So On and A Fat Black Memoir, forthcoming from Scribner. He is currently an Associate Professor of English at Vassar College.*

**How to Slowly Kill Yourself and Others in America**

[Image by Jim Cooke]

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