

Driving While Black

By Ross Cheung

Background: An honest, law-abiding African-American male, Anthony “Tony” Johnson is pulled over at a traffic stop by Officer Wilson, a racist Caucasian police officer. The players play different aspects of Tony Johnson’s mind, as he mentally reacts to an unfolding crisis.

Setup: This larp takes 4-7 people, including the director. Players should be made aware of the nature of the larp ahead of time before opting in. Have a square section of the floor that is boxed-in/boxed by masking tape just big enough for two people to walk around in. Everything inside this space represents the physical world in which Tony Johnson and Officer Wilson physically inhabit. Everything outside of this area exists in the mind of Tony Johnson, where the various aspects of his mind can exist, walk around, and interact. Set up a chair in the middle of this space, for the driver seat Tony is sitting in. At the game start, “Self-Preservation” is sitting in the chair as the dominant aspect, as he is normally in charge while operating a motor vehicle. Have each player choose an aspect of Tony’s mind to portray from the list on the next page, and explain the techniques they can use in-game.

Workshop: I recommend the following workshops in this order.

1. *Safety Mechanisms* – Explain “cut”, a phrase to halt an intense scene. Have PCs pair up and practice. Each pair stands facing each other, arms out, palms touching. The first person gently pushes his palms down, slowly pushing the second player’s hand back. Whenever this gets uncomfortable for the second player, they call “cut”, and the first player stops. Then switch roles and have the second player practice. Don’t skip this step, as players won’t call cut unless you practice it first.
2. *Opt out/Door is always open* – Inform each player that they can “opt out” of the action by sitting down and will be considered “out of character” for as long as they are sitting (have them practice this). Tell players that the “door is always open” and they may also leave the play area for whatever reason at any moment, no questions asked.
3. *The “No” exercise* – Have each player pair up with another player. Have each pair say “No!” to each other repeatedly, starting softly and raising the volume until both people are shouting it, and then at the crescendo decreasing the volume until they are back to the original volume.
4. *Nametags* - Have each player write the name of the aspect they are playing on a piece of tape, or other nametag, and put it on. Then begin the larp.

Techniques:

1. *Who is in the chair?* – At each point in time, exactly one of Tony’s aspects is dominant. This player remains within the taped area, plays as Tony, and interacts with Officer Wilson and the world. The other aspect must remain outside of the taped area and can only whisper their thoughts to Tony from outside the taped area.
2. *Freeze and Unfreeze* – At any point any of the PCs can call “Freeze” to stop the action inside the taped area/the physical world. Officer Wilson freezes, and the dominant aspect can interact with the others outside the taped area. This represents how a person’s internal thoughts operate extremely quickly, in mere eye blinks. The dominant aspect can then call “Unfreeze” and step back into the taped area, which unfreezes Officer Wilson/the outside world.
3. *Tap In/Out* – at any point, any of the aspects can tap the shoulder of the dominant aspect, and take over as the new dominant aspect. The aspect who was previously dominant can’t immediately tap back in until someone else has tapped in first. The dominant aspect may also *Tap Out*, pointing and naming another aspect to become the new dominant aspect, and then leaving the taped area.

Officer Wilson: The GM/director will play the role of Officer Wilson. While in the real world there are plenty of good police officers, Officer Wilson is not one of these. Officer Wilson is an authoritarian bully who sees people of color as potential criminals and less than human, believes that it's okay to stop and frisk, and is trained to see every person on the street first and foremost as a potential threat to himself and to the public. He is aware that cops charged with shooting African American males have a near-universal acquittal rate, and is rewarded for giving tickets and traffic fines, which provide revenue to the local municipality. Your job is to escalate things, and up the level of harassment slowly. Tony/ the players may try to placate you and get through the ordeal safely; your job is to not make it easy. You have a gun (optional: have a rubber prop), and cannot be physically overpowered.

Player Roles/Aspects: Allow players to choose who they wish to play during the set-up; these should be simple enough for them to remember (optional: you also can write these out on index cards).

- *Self-Preservation* – You're the most reasonable and level headed of the aspects. Your job is to keep Tony alive and well, no matter what it takes. You're the aspect most prone to think things through and rely on logic. You constantly admonish the others for being too impulsive and short sighted.
- *Anger* - You are the most intense emotion. You exist to warn Tony whenever something is wrong, that he is being mistreated, provoked, hurt, or otherwise having his boundaries violated. You're prone to acting without thinking. You also represent Tony's resentment for society's problems, and the ever-present existence of institutional racism and racial profiling really gets you going.
- *Core/Esteem* – You are Tony's sense of self-identity. You decide who he wants to see himself as, which is a generally honest, hard-working family man, and get upset when this is challenged. You're generally pretty chill but when insulted and/or confronted with challenges to your core identity you take it poorly and can become quite upset, emphatically arguing the opposite.
- *Love* – You represent Tony's feeling towards people around himself that he cares about, and sees as more important to himself. This includes the local community of whom he is a part of, but especially his wife and two-year old daughter, who he want to see again more than anything else. You encourage the others to self-love as well, though you and anger often do not get along.
- *Anxiety* – You exist to warn Tony about problems that aren't immediate threats. You show up often when least wanted. You are coming home after just being laid off, have a new kid and a mortgage, and really can't afford to pay a ticket, so right now you're pretty agitated. Feel free to remind everyone else of how isolated and vulnerable you feel, and how at the mercy of a cop you are.
- *Self-Actualization* – Your parents raised you with the stories of your heritage and taught you to never be ashamed of who you are. You grew up hearing stories of generations of people fighting for civil rights and genuinely wish that the world could be a better place. You believe society won't change unless people like you take a stand, and aren't afraid to get hurt in the process.

Ending the larp and debrief: The GM/director controls the end of the game by Officer Wilson, and depending on how things are going, can end the game by either letting Tony go with a ticket, or by shooting him. Either way, exercise your social judgment to find an appropriate time and manner to end the scene. The following are some recommended debriefing exercises:

1. Pair up, have each PC find the nearest person, and take a minute for one person to talk to the other person about what they are feeling. Then repeat, with the other person speaking.
2. As a group, tear off your name tags, crumple them up, and throw them back into the taped area.
3. "Yes" exercise – like the "No" exercise in the workshops, but this time pair up and say yes, starting softly, reaching a crescendo, and then dropping back to the original volume.
4. Circle up, go around, and ask each person to share a favorite moment or experience from the game. Then allow for people to talk more freely as a group.