

Being in One's Place: Race, Ontology and the Killing of Trayvon Martin

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The killing of Trayvon Martin along with the recent trial and acquittal of George Zimmerman have provoked many discussions and debates: some touching upon painful issues, others just rather painful to listen to or read. What struck me most were the conversations and opinions about what the killing, trial and subsequent acquittal mean for our nation. What we have come to learn is that they mean different things to different people. This should neither surprise us nor make us hesitate to examine still further the complex nature of this tragic killing, its aftermath and the history of our nation.

What I would like to suggest is that at very core of this tragedy is the fundamental issue of what it actually means for an African American (especially male) to be in the United States. I would argue that there is an “ontological” problem here: that there is no proper or legitimate place for a person of color “to be.” This problem has been raised many times by different people, including the novelist and philosopher Charles Johnson in his *Being and Race* and by the writer and cultural critic bell hooks [sic] in her *Black Looks*, among other notable Americans.

I am specifically saying it is an ontological problem, in large part, due to the very historical status of “being black” in the United States. Sadly, no matter where Trayvon Martin stood, for too many (including some people of color themselves), he would, by definition, *be* out of place. Thus, the suspicion George Zimmerman had and acted upon was a suspicion regarding the very existence of Trayvon Martin because as Angela Davis asserts, that “[i]n our society, the assumption is that if you are from a certain racialized community, you will have had some contact with the prison system [either directly or not].” And as a result “black men are essentially born with the social stigma equivalent to a felony conviction.” George Zimmerman’s “suspicion,” therefore, of Trayvon Martin, and perhaps of anyone of color, would always render him “out of place,” and hence worthy of observing, monitoring and policing.

Some may feel that this is an exaggeration of the current state of “being black” in the United States. But it doesn’t take much for us to uncover that suspicion of legitimacy, of appropriateness. Take for example the continued suspicion regarding the issue of President Obama’s status as a “real” citizen—the status of his birth is still doubted by any number of nervous and suspicious people. This is not just some arbitrary suspicion about Obama’s place (which is the White House); it is an historical reaction to a black man not being in his proper place, namely where he can be tolerated by White America. And, here is the crux of the matter: due to the very complex history of our nation’s birth and development, it is hard, if not impossible, for a person of color to be ever in the right place—in large measure because every place is a charged and a vexed reminder of how Africans came to be here in the first place.

There is much more to discuss. But, no matter what else the killing of Trayvon Martin means to contemporary Americans, it must remind us all (White, Black, Latino, Asian American, Native American, male, female, gay, straight, transgender) that being in the world, specifically being in the United States is a complex, and still dangerous, place to be. “Being” here in the United States has a history, unfortunately a very violent and bloody one. And, we who now inhabit this diverse nation need to remain ever vigilant and determined to overcome our many suspicions, but especially the suspicion that automatically assumes that Trayvon Martin was in the wrong place, and could never actually be in the right place.

Finding our place in the world is hard enough, but it becomes an almost impossible journey of self-discovery if we systematically make being in one’s place a mandate to stay in someplace that others determine appropriate for us. The killing of Trayvon Martin and the suspicion George Zimmerman had of him that led up to the killing remind us that traversing the contours of our nation, and even the streets of our own neighborhoods, is never free from risk, never free from historical and ideological misrepresentations. The killing of Trayvon Martin is a sad reminder that we, as a nation, have a long way to go, as both Walt Whitman and Malcolm X would put it, “to become what we someday will be.”

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