

# Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

## Home ‘Sick’: Reflections on the Events Surrounding Trayvon Martin

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*“But this is something we going to have to learn to do and quit saying that we are free in America when I know that we are not free. You are not free in Harlem. The people are not free in Chicago, because I’ve been there, too. They are not free in Philadelphia, because I’ve been there, too. And when you get it over with all the way around, some of the places is a Mississippi in disguise.”*

(Hamer 1964)

When hearing the news of acts of racial violence a familiar feeling emerges. Wherever I am, I want to go home to Denmark, a small quaint town in South Carolina. When I first heard about Trayvon Martin’s murder, my visceral reaction was no different, and an immediate feeling of homesickness came over me. When Martin was murdered I was in Storrs, Connecticut—a place in which I have resided for two years that, while nice, is not home. When social media lit up with the news of George Zimmerman’s acquittal for the murder of Martin, I was in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, with family, which offered momentary comfort that eventually turned into a longing for home. As I reflect on my constant desire to return home during events such as this, I realize that, deep down, I believe the struggle for racial equality seems hidden in the landscape of the Deep South:

# Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

a struggle concealed from the public view that remains very present for those of us who call the South ‘home’.<sup>1</sup> This struggle might take the form of visible protests and boycotts, but also everyday acts of resistance that include laying claim to a space with a tumultuous history of racial violence. Peniel Joseph (2006: 51) writes that during the 1960s, “blacks outside the South seemed incapable of convincing local and national media, politicians, or even civil rights leaders that their concerns were as compelling as sharecroppers registering to vote for the first time in a century, or as inspiring as college students sitting in at coffee shops and lunch counters”. It seems that in the present-day struggles for justice, something different is occurring, and the insiders’ perspectives of those of us who call this place—the South—home are diminished. I struggle with whether or not the South produced the geographic conditions for George Zimmerman to safely murder Trayvon Martin, as such violence surpasses geographic boundaries cutting across rural, urban and suburban spaces. However, I do believe the Deep South’s history of racial violence and white supremacy makes it increasingly difficult to disentangle the racial violence of the South from its natural landscape. The often-heard statement ‘this is just what happens in the South’ provides a problematic, but some would argue accurate, backdrop for Martin’s violent murder.

The essays that follow reflect on the many events surrounding Trayvon Martin’s murder and George Zimmerman’s acquittal. Contributors were asked to reflect on the events of the past year and pay specific attention to the geographic matters that underwrite Martin’s death; all of the essayists wrote pieces that are personal. They pay particular attention to the interconnected themes of race, racism, justice and invisibility, as well as touching on the responsibility of the discipline of Geography in relation to

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<sup>1</sup> The Deep South generally refers to southern states in the United States most reliant on a plantation economy during slavery, including Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi and South Carolina.

# Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

these themes. In **Jenna Loyd**'s photographic essay she reflects on U.S. contemporary racism, where she argues that the curb must be understood alongside of W.E.B. DuBois' color line and the ways in which acts of racial violence emerge with and through economic and social policies that reinforce racial divides. Loyd's discussion, therefore, contextualizes how Zimmerman's defense attorneys framed the curb as a racialized weapon. She also shares with us photographs of her trip throughout the Mississippi Delta in the immediate days following the Zimmerman verdict. Loyd poignantly notes how the representation of the struggle for racial justice occurs on and in the landscape, with certain sites of struggle receiving less attention than or erased by the dominant narrative of Civil Rights. **Sharon Luk** interrogates 'violence' in the aftermath of the Zimmerman verdict; she thinks through the ways in which Zimmerman's acquittal has prompted the call for everyday citizens to address personal racial biases. This undermines, Luk argues, our understanding of racism as a politicized structure. Luk also offers a critical lens through which to read justice in relation to Trayvon Martin—as the call to justice can serve to reinforce the same criminal justice system that has never been just. **Rickie Sanders** provides a deeply personal account that begins with how the events of Martin's life and death functioned in social media in unique and racialized ways. Sanders, like Luk, delves into notions of justice arguing that people privilege social justice over procedural justice. Finally, Sanders urges geographers to look inward toward a discipline that "has a special and conflicted relationship to race", urging us to call racism what it is: racism.

After reading these timely essays, it occurs to me that a part of my desire to return home stems from fear. I fear that the events surrounding Trayvon Martin's life and death will be repackaged, told in a way that sanitizes history and diminishes the voices of people who continue to be active agents of change in this place they call home. I find

# Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

myself wondering where and if a memorial or monument will be built for Martin, heeding Alderman and Dwyer's (2008) call to question the context of such a monument. The competing narrative over what Martin's life and death represent are occurring during an era where the myth of a post-racial society is so commonplace that very obvious racial and racist metaphors (like the accusation that Martin used the sidewalk as a weapon), as well as practices of racial violence, are lost or rendered trivial. Moreover, as Luk reminds us, Martin's murder is discussed alongside a growing narrative of personal responsibility that can direct attention away from the need to transform society. Will Martin be commemorated as a part of a Civil Rights era that many see as having a definite start and end point? Will Martin be memorialized at all on and in a landscape where 'ordinary' (to use Sanders' word) people's acts of resistance are routinely diminished?

One space that arguably became more visible during Martin's murder and Zimmerman's trial is 'black Twitter' (Neal 2011; Hilton 2013). Twitter circulated news and commentaries on Martin, engendering complex narratives in the public sphere and the black public sphere. Harris-Lacewell (2004: 3) says that any discussion of black political thought "must begin with the study of the conversatin', shit talkin', gab fests, rap sessions, where black people are just kickin' it on the set". Arguably, 'black Twitter' operates as a community where ideas are spread and debated in nuanced ways. Neal (2011) notes "what has very often driven the relationship of black folks to technology is the ability to always be in communication with each other". This in no way negates the need for place-specific, in-person protests, nor does it limit the discussion to black people. I would argue, moreover, that the ability for people to respond in 'real time' to events such as the death of Martin or the acquittal of Zimmerman creates a space where short-term reactionary responses are privileged over devising long-term structural

# Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

solutions. Yet spaces like black Twitter create a new geography that links diverse critical commentaries on race and racism to potentially new locations, including grounded activist spaces that are interested in developing transformative community politics.

Home for me is a horrifically beautiful place; my love home for stems from my ability to see through what Robin Kelley (2002: 2-3) calls my “third eye...in which the map to a new world is in the imagination, in what we see in our third eyes rather than in the desolation that surrounds us”. Dreaming of new possibility is an act of resistance, and I see in the Deep South a place with limitless possibility where many continue to imagine a better future while actively working towards it. Admittedly another part of my love for home stems from stubbornness and a fierce protective spirit to claim a place where the dominant discourse sometimes attempts to erase my very existence as an ‘ordinary’ black woman. Whatever my longings are, I continue to be ‘home-sick’.

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# Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

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