

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

A Better Place

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Mumia Abu-Jamal (2013) observed that dominant outrage at the Zimmerman verdict ignores the systematic and favours the episodic—thus calling for sentimentalism rather than transformation. Abu-Jamal is making a geographic argument, applying logics of scale to understand the workings of race and ideology, as they function in relation to human life and death (cf. Gilmore 2002). In essence, he asks: What material processes bond the immediately apparent (an episode of murder) with the structurally abstracted (a system of industrialized genocide), and what epistemological mechanisms exist to help articulate and/or disarticulate these relationships? How and why? These are questions that, at their best, develop some of our deepest insights about the interconnectedness—despite every attempt at dissociation—of the seen and unseen (Woods 1998; 2002; McKittrick 2006). My comments here explore the struggles and stakes involved in making sense of spatialized relations in the Trayvon Martin case. Specifically, I am interested in thinking about how different knowledges produced *about* subjectivities, bodies, households, neighborhoods, communities, social institutions, nation-states, diasporas and universes are arranged and re-arranged across scales to offer self-validating explanations for existence (cf. Chandler 2008).

A basic conflict driving the Martin tragedy is a problem for geography: the relentless conceit that violence inheres only in certain places; that it only erupts ‘there’, and being innate, not only belongs there but is born and grows there as if part of a natural order. Such a deterministic

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and static reading of space speaks to the field of ‘urban ecology’ (see Park and Burgess 1921) and forms the basis of whole schools of sociological, geographic, psychological and political thought. Hence the bitter irony that people consider neighborhoods like George Zimmerman’s the measure of ‘safe’ and ‘good’, no matter what the evidence of their brutality.

The unfortunate, openly closeted truth we all know is that violence rather than democracy is the USA’s universal. Mortal aggression, sexual and domestic violence, theft, fraud, traumatic stress, neglect, alcoholism, drug addiction: such crises cut across every racial, cultural, economic, generational, sexual, gendered and geographic boundary. Communities everywhere must confront these problems; only the privileged live by them as bedrocks of their social life, while others are criminalized to death for surviving in these norms of civilization. Crimes of racial capitalism and ethnic supremacy become reified—something of someone else, somewhere else—and ideologically re-materialized onto Black bodies (Wells 1997; Baldwin 1998; Spillers 2003; James 2007). Such reifications of meaning enable systematic killing and support the logic that if Zimmerman killed Martin, it must be because Martin brought violence with him and spread his property over Zimmerman’s.¹ This case thus exemplifies how understandings about the ordering of matter directly shape both social life and premature death, and how such murders happen because the U.S. way of life has long created the permission (Kelley 2013). At the same time, Martin’s death, as well as the discourses surrounding it, expose how geographically-based ideological assumptions serve as indispensable engines of racialization, a matter of both historical and ontological urgency. That is, exploring this alchemy of meanings, as it articulates across scales to suture dominant

¹ That is, this process of ideological reproduction that has co-facilitated the historical and epistemological conditions for Martin’s murder to occur, and through which it makes sense. In this regard, the term ‘property’, as it appears here and throughout the rest of this piece, articulates dynamically across dimensions: namely, in the doubleness of innate properties ascribed to humans through the ideological machinations of racism, alongside the privatization of land as property that forms the historical basis of capital accumulation. Historically, this interplay across valences also formulated the ontological fantasy of humans as private property at the heart of racial slavery.

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productions of ‘race’ with capitalist productions of space, ultimately challenges us to re-situate more precisely the specificities of Martin’s murder within longer-wave historical struggles to preserve or destroy collective being as such (cf. Robinson 1983).

The issue of defining race within the context of Martin’s death itself elaborates this problematic. Indignation following the Zimmerman verdict has prompted calls for more national dialogues on race. Exemplifying a dominant framework for such dialogue, President Obama’s (2013) 19 July address to the nation explained the dilemma of “race” as a problem of how to “bolster and reinforce our African American boys”. This kind of perspective focuses on better disciplining the ‘problem’ (Black boys and men), while refusing to acknowledge the crisis of whiteness as an organizing ontological principle (Wynter 1976; Ferreira da Silva 2005) or the multi-ethnic dimensions of anti-Black racism as a global system (Sexton 2010; Costa Vargas 2012). Again this kind of worldview, ideologically enacted, renders *race* an innate property of presumably non-normative individuals (the globally marginalized), and posits *racism* as a matter of both personal preference (whom we can get along with) and public representation (how ‘stereotypes’ operate in social interactions and media). These renderings reproduce systems of racial apartheid by naturalizing or leaving unchallenged its socio-spatial arrangements and, moreover, making them seem more livable by appealing to abstract potential for idealized human achievement. That is, logics that locate problems of race and racism in individual character and behavior, rather than in material landscapes and infrastructures, rest on a notion of the latter as pre-given and unchanging. Such assertions of space as inert rather than social thus mystify capitalist movements of racialized enclosure, rendering the latter a fixed part of earth instead of a human practice and product of historical struggles.

Just as this form of race-thinking facilitates the segregation of space, apartheid-thinking also facilitates such ideological productions and re-embodiments of race. When President Obama (2013) asked us in his national address to “do some soul-searching” about our own “[racial] bias”—itself implying that race is born in individual ‘souls’ apart from social history, and that

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racism is a matter of opinion—he specified the *places* where such contemplation is appropriate and inappropriate. The President asserts that these acts of thinking do *not* belong in politics, encouraging each of us instead to “wring as much bias out of myself as I can” in the privacy of our “families and churches and workplaces” (Obama 2013). Thus, if this enlightened race leader characterizes ‘race’ as an inborn (yet adaptable) individual trait or essence, and racism as a dirty thought we must purify, these kinds of comments are grounded in a characterization of space—where we live and embody and talk race—as inherently bifurcated into realms of ‘private’ versus ‘political’, the former sanctified and the latter profane.² In this sense, protecting innate spatial rights, wherein ‘space’ refers to private property, goes hand in hand with protecting innate *racial* rights, wherein ‘race’ refers to private property too (cf. Harris 1993). Hence the historical travesty we have made of the Civil Rights Movement: that this country has applied bitter gains of the past to enforce Zimmerman’s rights to whiteness rather than Martin’s right to life.

We face a profound dilemma as we seek to re-make our own paths towards social transformation and justice. Many currently organizing under the banner of ‘racial justice’ for Trayvon Martin indeed recognize and call attention to racism as a structural antagonism, not merely an individual bias. Nevertheless, the call for ‘racial justice’ in the final instance seems to coalesce with a paradigm of ‘racial rights’ which, as I have argued, ultimately functions to reproduce (often through a mode of reform) racial apartheid precisely because it carries in it a legacy of global anti-Black violence. In the case of Trayvon Martin, many seeking to ‘get’ racial justice advertently or inadvertently subscribe to the same definitions of race and racism that uphold

² That the workplace has made its way into what is considered ‘private’ (*vis-à-vis* its inclusion with other sites normatively designated as such) speaks volumes about the intimacies and idealizations of post-industrial capitalism. This marks a shift from past understandings of the workplace as commonly associated with the public realm or politics: the latter spaces all assigned as masculine, civically engaged, and rationally or scientifically organized. This ideological change seems tethered to the feminization of labor, affective economies, and decentralized production processes that characterize innovations in finance capitalism.

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apartheid and genocide: Martin's race is an innate property marked by his physical appearance, and he and others are 'profiled' and/or killed because of stereotypes about the way they look. More generally, even if not categorically, the desire for 'racial justice' also implies tautologically that people of different 'races' should have equal access to the fruits of racial capitalism, apartheid, and white supremacy, and inversely equal exposure to its ills. In a cruel irony, this is ultimately the same logic that protects Zimmerman—rendering the problem one of whose rights to whiteness should take precedent, in a system that may situationally favor one or the other but can never enfranchise both.

Under this rubric the fundamental socio-spatial arrangement of civic life and premature death has not changed—even if the organization of people into segregated places may have shifted (under new patterns of racialization, a conundrum imprecisely connoted in the term 'post-racial'). These oppositional forms of race-thinking thus continue to mystify rather than confront the historical processes through which societies invent categories of human difference—commonly known as 'races'—and organize people through them. Moreover, such perspectives ignore that these very processes of racialization are what give social form to systematically distinguishable courses of death, which is also to say visions of life (cf. Fields 1990; Lye 2008). Engaging race and space in these ways would entail grappling with an understanding of racism as less a matter of cosmetic misunderstanding than a multi-scalar infrastructure of human annihilation (Gilmore 2007).

The following conclusions re-iterate critical perspectives, such as those issued by the organization Gender JUST (2013), that challenge recent directions in 'progressive' thought and organizing. One immediate demand for racial justice calls for George Zimmerman's punishment to the fullest and fairest extent of the law, reasoning that this resolution to the episodic may somehow mark a real or symbolic 'victory' over the systematic, rather than reinforce it. Those of us searching to end oppression must ask ourselves whether it is possible to create the places of justice we seek by only selectively practicing our own commitments. Can we transform the criminal

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justice system for everybody *except* for whom we want punished? Is this transformation? While these questions may seem purist or naïve (or, worse, apologetic and ‘philosophical’), history has shown time and again that such reactions only turn democratic movements into reformed gulags—even when these compromises are imagined in the moment to serve as necessary and temporary means to an end (which on this road, we will never see).

Reflecting on these issues does not require blanket rejection of all legal redress; it requires greater attention to the kinds of interventions we pursue and why. Two relevant examples from the vast research in this area come immediately to mind. First, rather than demanding policies to control ‘racial profiling’ which still maintains our accountability to racist law, past organizations such as the Los Angeles-based Coalition Against Police Abuse have organized for community policing and civilian review boards that hold law enforcement accountable to people (Costa Vargas 2006; Southern California Library 2007). Second, a multi-ethnic Los Angeles-based group, Mothers Reclaiming Our Children, fought to create social accountability through principles of mutual recognition and caretaking rather than retribution and fear (Gilmore 2007). Such seeds of justice strengthen foundations from which to build power as community rather than to appeal to power as the law.

Moreover, reflecting on these issues does not require the intellectualized (or racist) reduction of existential grief—compounded by the tragedy of losing a child—which some communities experience episodically and Black communities have survived systematically. It is not my goal to pacify rage nor prevent anyone from seeking to harm Zimmerman: not only because I cannot do it, but because such resolution to this case would complicate, but not change, my ultimate concern. My thoughts and prayers are with those who mourn in ways I do not fathom to ‘know’. Yet if we accept that freedom is never given (King 2003), then perhaps we will eventually find that it will have had to be re-invented (Moten 2003; Spillers 2003). One of the most challenging lessons consuming the field of Black geographies is how to re-place the idea of *getting* justice with *practices of creating it*.

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My hope for all of us is simply that we not condemn ourselves to this place by surrendering our agency and imaginations to those who refuse to acknowledge the sanctity of life.

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