

# Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

## **Trayvon Martin: The Blogosphere, Racial Profiling, Social Justice, Pit Bulls, and ‘The Talk’**

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Blogs and tweets have become a standard feature of contemporary society.<sup>1</sup> As the events in Sanford, Florida unfolded (from the murder of Trayvon Martin to the non-arrest to the arrest to the non-guilty verdict of George Zimmerman) I could not resist diving into their murky waters.<sup>2</sup> Social networking sites and weblogs not only produce content (posts and responses), but they build social relations. For a number of reasons, they can also be enormously influential, as the Trayvon Martin/George Zimmerman incident demonstrates.<sup>3</sup>

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1 Blogs are web-based discussion sites often focused on a single subject. They can be single authored or the work of a small group. Recently, newspapers, interest groups, and other media outlets have entered the blogosphere, now accounting for much of what’s there. Tweets are text messages of 140 characters or less posted on Twitter, an online micro-blogging and social networking site.

2 I frequently read popular media—newspapers and magazines. Since I teach a course on ‘Images of the City in Popular Culture’, I have a reason that justifies my foray into this other world. I’m fascinated by what goes on in the blogosphere.

3 They are interactive, instantaneous, often shielded by a cloak of invisibility and anonymity and illuminate multiple regimes of truth.

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It is somewhat unclear exactly how something gains traction in social media, but the events around the murder of Trayvon Martin certainly did.<sup>4</sup> Trayvon Martin was just an ordinary young man—to the extent that young black men can claim that privilege. He was not engaged in revolutionary or transgressive acts. He left home to get Skittles. It was highly unlikely that it occurred to him that he would be stalked and murdered. Sanford, Florida, in 2013 is not, as we know, 1964 Mississippi. Martin, as far as we know, did not engage in the same kind of struggles as many before him who had been murdered—Chaney, Goodman or Schwerner.<sup>5</sup> And he was not explicitly challenging the status quo. Martin’s murder did not take place in an urban centre—this was not New York City, Los Angeles or San Francisco, where young black men have been killed or maimed by police officers who have been described in the media as insensitive and/or untrained (at best) or ‘trigger happy’ (at worst). Trayvon Martin was not Amadou Diallo, Rodney King or Oscar Grant.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, he was not shot by a policeman but by an *ordinary* citizen, an *everyman*, fully committed to upholding the status quo. So the question is: what is it

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4 This issue has been addressed in the work of Java *et al.* (2006), and Farrell and Drezner (2008).

5 James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner were civil rights workers shot at close range in Mississippi in 1964 by members of the Mississippi White Knights of the KKK, the Neshoba County’s Sheriff Office, and the Philadelphia Police Department located in Philadelphia, Mississippi. They had been engaged in efforts to register African Americans to vote.

6 Amadou Diallo was a 23-year-old immigrant from West Africa who was shot and killed by four NYPD plain-clothes officers outside his apartment in 1999. He was struck 19 times. All four officers were acquitted.

Rodney King was an African-American construction worker who, while on parole for robbery, was beaten by five officers of the LAPD following a high-speed car chase in 1991. The incident was captured on videotape and disseminated worldwide. It showed the five officers surrounding King, striking him repeatedly, and using excessive force. After a trial, the police officers were acquitted.

Similar to Amadou Diallo, Oscar Grant III was an unarmed black man fatally shot (in the back) by a BART police officer. The events were captured on digital video and cellphone cameras and shown worldwide; the footage was watched by millions. The officer was sentenced to two years minus time served. He is currently out on parole.

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about this incident that stretched the grid to the point where it almost shut down and mobilized countless Americans to demand justice? Why did the death of Martin instigate the response it did—a loud and forceful critique of race and racism in contemporary America and an equally powerful and vehement backlash? What is it about Martin’s death and the subsequent verdict that is different? Why was it—for many—a radicalizing moment? Why did it prompt a sitting President to speak? And why Florida? Perhaps because many hoped that this gated community in Sanford FL was the ‘New South’, and that the New South was different? Was this hope shaped by a vision a New South that is more thoughtful of its past, more progressive, more invested in projecting an image of a ‘post-racial’ America? Is this hope reflective of a New South, then, which is very unlike the old, calcified Northeast, the tainted West, or the rusting, declining Midwest. Or was it because every link in the chain of events was so incredulous?

Geographers suggest that race and space are mutually constitutive of each other (Sibley 1995; Delaney 2002; Gilmore 2002; Wilson 2002; Inwood and Yarbrough 2010). Thus, the process of racialization takes place in spaces and rather than inscribing essentialized notions of race onto every body, it is more accurate to think that bodies are *raced in spaces*. When thought of this way, geography (understanding space, place, location, distance, region, and spatial interaction) lies at the heart of every struggle around race. So, could these events have unfolded as they did in any other place - New Orleans, Philadelphia or Chicago? Would the verdict have been the same? These kinds of questions demand that we ask the question of whether the young black male can ever be unessentialized—or, put differently, can his racialized body ever be read beyond the entwining scripts of criminality and dispossession? And if this is, in fact, about processes that emphasize how bodies are raced in space, how is it that George Zimmerman succeeds in occupying a racial intersection? The racial privilege he enjoys—whiteness even though his ethnic background is interrogated—in this instance draws attention to the importance of the geographical imperative and struggle around race and space.

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Rachel Newcomb, who blogs for *The Huffington Post* had a very interesting perspective on the link between Florida, Martin, Zimmerman, and geography. She cautions against pointing to the commonly held idea of *Florida exceptionalism*, but nonetheless notes:

“Once again [Florida]...you’ve stolen the national spotlight for hanging chads and burning Qur’ans...the Ocoee massacre of 1920...the Miami riots in 1980...Burmese python killing contests in the Everglades...#Floridaman [a self-proclaimed serial arsonist]...the ‘face eating cannibal’...panic over bath salts...In the media, the headline became just another bizarre Florida moments. Yet the larger issue, identifying and treating mental illness, something Florida does not do well, was ignored...[F]rom 2009-2011, mental health services nationwide were cut by \$1.6 billion dollars from state budgets. Florida is the second to worst state for funding mental health services, with only 42 percent of people with severe and persistent mental illness receiving treatment.”

While Newcomb does not directly connect Martin’s murder to Zimmerman being mentally ill—and certainly it is problematic to suggest that mentally ill people are murderers—she does suggest that Florida is a mirror of larger societal problems, alluding perhaps to the recent nationwide increase in crimes and acts of violence involving guns.

What stands out in my mind is what the Trayvon Martin/George Zimmerman incident signals for the future of race and race relations in this country. Do *ordinary* white people (especially white women who made up the majority of the jury) live in fear of unarmed young black and brown men? Does the narrative of criminality mark all black and brown men? Is George Zimmerman really an ‘everyman’? Would the verdict have been the same if the jury had been all men? In the eyes of the everyman, are these bodies always viewed with fear and suspicion, and then can racialized masculinity ever be unessentialized? Did Martin’s very

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existence pose a visible threat to life, liberty and property, and did it challenge the institution of white supremacy, which Zimmerman felt duty bound to uphold? What if this is a narrative that will anticipate our futures? How, then, is geography implicated in our future?

Places are facilitators and crucibles of social, economic, political and cultural intention. They are sites where discourse is normalized and naturalized; practices are challenged and debated; and interventions are made possible. Race is not simply reflected in spatial arrangements (gated communities, the home, the locker-room, the office, the street, the sidewalk, an so on); but spaces also constitute and/or reinforce aspects of race. In other words, race is what it is and does what it does precisely because of how it is given spatial expression in place. Did the blogosphere, in challenging what happened in Sanford FL, de-spatialize race and re-constitute it as ‘the same’ everywhere? How do we engage, and hope to undo, these complicated geographic and racial processes?

A recent experience I had while walking my dog, Miles, overlays the Trayvon Martin/George Zimmerman incident and brought the events, at least for me, into full relief. On this beautiful Sunday morning Miles and I walked further than usual and crossed the boundary into the adjacent neighborhood. We approached a Starbucks coffee shop, where several people were sitting outside, leisurely reading newspapers and enjoying coffee with their dogs resting contentedly at their feet. As Miles (a pit bull) and I approached, a black lab lunged toward us, knocking down tables, spilling coffee, barking hysterically, and disturbing the peace and calm that had existed. I stopped immediately and decided to cross to the other side of the street. While waiting to cross—with the black lab still out of control—several people came out of the Starbucks to see what was happening. Without exception every one of them looked toward Miles and me with contempt and scorn, as though *we* had lunged at the retriever, knocked over the tables, and disturbed the peace and calm that existed. We committed an unintentional transgression and crossed a boundary. Thus, Miles and I were the problem. Miles, lovely animal

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that he is, was unbothered. I on the other hand was furious. I patted him (he gave me a big wet kiss) and reassured him that he was the good boy. It was a painful experience. Miles and I had been profiled.<sup>7</sup> Who/what did George Zimmerman see when he looked at Trayvon Martin—a young black man in a hoody—potential danger, a threat, a criminal, and a lawbreaker or a young man who deserved at least a presumption of innocence? *Who* was the problem here?

The Trayvon Martin incident also raises questions regarding the role that race plays in Stand Your Ground laws. More than 20 states have Stand Your Ground laws (sometimes referred to as ‘castle laws’) similar to Florida’s. The manner in which these laws are enforced and implemented points to systematic biases and racism. According to [Newcomb](#):

“[w]ithin five years of the nation's first Stand Your Ground law passing in 2005, justifiable homicides tripled. A study of 4,650 FBI homicide records shows that Stand Your Ground laws increase the likelihood that the shooter will be found not guilty, particularly in cases where a white person has killed a black person.”

These laws also raise the question of what constitutes safe space in ‘post racial’ America. Sadly, the manner in which they are implemented force us to ask ourselves whether the bodies of young men of color have any value in the eyes of the state.

Without a doubt, the case—and the verdict—dealt a heavy blow for young men of color. It also dealt a heavy blow for their parents, causing them to revisit the age that they have ‘the talk’ with their sons and what they say. A friend who is African American shared her conundrum: “I remember having ‘the talk’ with my sons when they were 12 and 13, after they had been stopped by the Amherst Massachusetts cops as they walked down the street because

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<sup>7</sup> Racial profiling occurs when race is used as the determining factor in deciding whether to engage in law enforcement.

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there had been a report of a robbery by a black man. Their father (who is Caucasian) tore into the police chief's office and threatened to sue the town if it ever happened again...but I knew that I had to prepare them for what they would face as young African-American males. Before that, like any parent, we had told them that the policeman was their friend and if they were ever in trouble, lost, or afraid, they could always turn to a cop for help. They knew my father had been a Chicago policeman; they grew up with a big photo of him in his uniform gracing our front hall. Our reversal had to have been confusing for them.”

Writer Kiese Laymon says you tell them:

“...to never ever forget I was born on parole, which means no black hoodies in wrong neighborhoods, no jogging at night, hands in plain sight at all times in public, no intimate relationships with white women, never driving over the speed limit or doing those rolling stops at stop signs, always speaking the King's English in the presence of white folks, never being outperformed in school or in public by white students, and, most importantly, always remembering that no matter what, the worst of white folks will do anything to get you.”

With this in mind and coupled with the over-policing of black communities, we note that George Zimmerman was not a policeman. In that regard, he and Trayvon Martin were equals whose racial identities, once mapped onto the space of a gated community, were encoded with the weight of white supremacy. That history served to underwrite the local space and national imaginary that Martin walked through and the courtroom where the verdict was decided. It produced a moral landscape that normalized violence and racism.

Martin's death and the verdict exposed the dangerous and unstable bedrock of race relations in America. It is a particularly salient moment that unfolded in the context of the emergence of the Tea Party, economic restructuring, attacks on affirmative action, and the

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retrenchment (and associated backlash) of white privilege. These events also bring into full relief a legal system that only offers (not guarantees) a limited and narrow view of procedural justice. However, procedural justice is not the justice that people of color see as important. More important is *social* justice. The legal system and the justice system come across as contradictory, operating at cross-purposes, and highly performative. It is deeply, deeply problematic. From the moment Zimmerman first laid eyes on Trayvon Martin to the moment when the six jurors accepted the idea that Martin was frightening and threatening and found HIM guilty, the outcome of the case was informed by what people think about black men in this country. Nothing else mattered. Trayvon Martin's body was a vessel carrying familiar cargo.

David Brooks said recently that “[t]he humanities are in decline because people have lost sight of the core mission. Humanists have spent too much time talking about social repair and not enough time talking about internal improvement.” As much as the Trayvon Martin/George Zimmerman incident is a geographical issue, it is a moral issue.

Leith Mullings, President of the American Anthropological Association, wrote shortly after the verdict:

“Those of us who research race, racism and inequality must continue to name racism without sugarcoating it; to analyze the ways in which racism is maintained and produced inside and outside of our discipline...Most important, we need to interrogate the new hidden forms of structural racism and deconstruct, in the best sense of the word, the ways in which racism expresses itself in the age of ‘post-racial color blindness’.”

Like anthropology, geography has a special and conflicted relationship to race. It was the work of Ellen Churchill Semple and the environmental determinists who nurtured the idea that certain places produced certain *kinds* of people and these social groupings, who they *were*, were limited

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by virtue of where they lived: along the coasts, in the mountains, in the valley and on the plains. As one reader noted, “this may not be too different from Zimmerman’s logic in terms of who belongs in certain environments or neighborhoods and who does not.” This kind of logic most certainly shaped Zimmerman’s actions and his noticeable and deadly disciplining of a black man—a *kind* of person—who was not *in* the right place.

My hat goes off to the geographers who work on race, especially those who focus on social justice. The ideological and teaching practices that are required to rethink the interlocking workings of place, race and violence require unceasing and unwavering commitment. With the signs (Whites Only) gone, leaving only geographic signifiers left, finding a way to have deep, honest discussions of race and color-blind/post-racial racism within and outside our discipline will demonstrate our continuing commitment. What is geography—specifically geography concerned with social justice, race, racism, and power—for? Where and how can we make a difference? These are the questions that David Brooks asks all of us in the academy to think about. What kind of world do we want. They are not only political questions. They are moral questions.

By the way, the owner of the black lab never apologized.

*October 2013*

## **Blogs and websites**

The Whole System Failed Trayvon Martin

[http://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/16/opinion/the-whole-system-failed.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/16/opinion/the-whole-system-failed.html?_r=0)

Zimmerman Trial: The View From Inside The Courtroom

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<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=200763387>

Stand Your Ground Increases Racial Bias in “Justifiable Homicide” Trials

<http://thesocietypages.org/socimages/2013/07/13/stand-your-ground-laws-increases-racial-bias-in-justifiable-homicide-trials/>

Is The Zimmerman Prosecution Legally 'Weak?'

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=200763389>

Zimmerman Trial In The Court Of Public Opinion

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=200763391>

The New Vigilantes: Trayvon Martin and the 'shoot first' lobby

<http://www.southernstudies.org/2012/03/the-new-vigilantes-trayvon-martin-and-the-shoot-first-lobby.html>

Rachel Jeantel, Trayvon Martin's Friend, May Have Helped And Hurt George Zimmerman's Defense

[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/06/30/rachel-jeantel-trayvon-martin-george-zimmerman\\_n\\_3525805.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/06/30/rachel-jeantel-trayvon-martin-george-zimmerman_n_3525805.html)

The Trayvon Martin Killing, Explained

<http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2012/03/what-happened-trayvon-martin-explained>

Race, Tragedy and Outrage Collide After a Shot in Florida

[http://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/02/us/trayvon-martin-shooting-prompts-a-review-of-ideals.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/02/us/trayvon-martin-shooting-prompts-a-review-of-ideals.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0)

Trayvon exists in every American city

<http://blogs.aljazeera.com/blog/americas/trayvon-exists-every-american-city>

President Obama: ‘Trayvon Martin could have been me 35 years ago’

<http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2013/jul/19/president-obama-trayvon-martin-could-have-been-me/>

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Trayvon Martin case a travesty of justice

<http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2013/08/201384102857620336.html>

Shooting of Trayvon Martin

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shooting\\_of\\_Travon\\_Martin](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shooting_of_Travon_Martin)

Trayvon Martin Shooting Fast Facts

<http://www.cnn.com/2013/06/05/us/trayvon-martin-shooting-fast-facts>

1 Black Man Is Killed Every 28 Hours by Police or Vigilantes: America Is Perpetually at War with Its Own People

<http://www.alternet.org/news-amp-politics/1-black-man-killed-every-28-hours-police-or-vigilantes-america-perpetually-war-its>

Beyond Trayvon: Black and Unarmed

<http://www.theroot.com/multimedia/beyond-trayvon-black-and-unarmed>

When will it end? Deadly racial targeting of black men and teens is hardly ancient history

<http://www.nydailynews.com/news/national/black-men-killed-white-men-ancient-history-article-1.1398806>

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