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What Trayvon Martin's Murder and the George Zimmerman Trial Verdict tell us

CNN analyst, Mo Ivory, is one of the few people to distinguish between Zimmerman's Latin-ness and his whiteness. It is ludicrous to presume that Zimmerman's Latin background made him immune to anti-black racism. In fact, the terms Latino and Hispanic need to be critiqued. In a country like Jamaica or Barbados where British colonization and slavery created deep racial hierarchies, there is no sweeping racial/ethnic term used to signify the experience of shared colonization under Britain.

16 July 2013

I have a confession to make. I did not watch George Zimmerman's trial - live on CNN. I deliberately avoided subjecting myself to the full brunt of the case. Why? Deep down I knew the verdict would not be the one for which Trayvon's parents, and millions of blacks around the world were praying.

Of course this is not to say that millions of people of all races were not outraged by Trayvon's murder and the verdict. But honestly, what many feel is the lack of justice will have its most chilling impact on black folks. For black people, the not guilty verdict within the context of the deeply flawed "stand your ground" law seems to reify the centuries old logic that we are not accorded the same value as our white fellow citizens. For blacks, this assertion is (sadly) not new. But it is, nevertheless, absolutely terrifying.

Even with my deliberately uncommitted approach to the trial, there are certain facts that I could not escape. We all know that the unarmed black, seventeen-year-old named Trayvon was walking home to his father's house in a gated community with Skittles and iced tea. We also know that Zimmerman, an armed, white Latino adult was patrolling that same area as a neighbourhood watch captain. We know that Zimmerman, who called the police and reported Trayvon as suspicious, was recorded stating "These assholes always get away... These fucking punks." We also know that Zimmerman disregarded police instructions to stay in his car, wait for their arrival and not approach Trayvon. Instead, he exited the car, pursued the teenager, a struggle ensued (captured again on a cell phone recording) and Trayvon ended up with a single gunshot wound to the chest.

But from the beginning it all went terribly wrong. First of all, what makes a teenager walking home with candy a "fucking punk" in need of monitoring? To support their theory of racial profiling, the prosecution should actually have exploited the fact that Zimmerman was apparently on edge due to the recent spate of break-ins and vandalism in the neighbourhood. But if we can't see that the "profiling" being done was at least on three levels - age, class, and race - then we are kidding ourselves. Trayvon was to Zimmerman out of place in the context of the Retreat at Twin Lakes, the middle class, gated community where Trayvon's father, Tracy Martin lived. But as a neighbourhood watch captain who was also a resident, Zimmerman had a responsibility to know who lived in the gated community. While obviously, depending on the scale of the housing complex, he would not necessarily know each owner by name, he did have a responsibility to know that the community was a multi-racial one. Armed with that knowledge, Trayvon's young, black male body, walking home at night (or walking home in the daylight), would not have seemed out of place.

From the start then, Zimmerman's good Samaritan, defender of the people, self-defense story falls far short. If Trayvon became an attacker as Zimmerman claims, inflicting the bloody wounds that Zimmerman alleged, then how is it that none of Zimmerman's DNA was found on Trayvon's hands? The defense's use of the block of concrete as the supposed weapon that Trayvon wielded against Zimmerman was equally ludicrous. Unless I missed something and Trayvon was actually the Incredible Hulk, he did not tear the sidewalk from the earth and bang it against Zimmerman's head! Furthermore, if Trayvon could be said to have been "armed" with the concrete as the defense stipulated, then it was the prosecution's responsibility to make it abundantly clear to the jury that Zimmerman was then thrice armed: with the same concrete, his SVU, and his gun.

The Sandford Police Department dropped the ball early releasing Zimmerman without a thorough investigation and charges were only brought (and the Police Chief, Chief Bill Lee fired) months later after nation-wide protests. Next, the composition of the jury (five white and one Hispanic woman) stacked the deck in Zimmerman's favour. That much of the media coverage touted their femaleness and yet overlooked the fact of their whiteness was a disturbing reminder of the erasure of the historical and continuing participation of white women in colonialism and racism. There was much talk about the jurors' ability to relate to one of the prosecution's key witnesses, the young black woman Rachel Jeantel, who was on the phone with Trayvon when he was accosted and murdered. At issue was whether her race and presumed class difference would render her testimony unintelligible to them. But why was the same scrutiny not applied to whether or not the jurors could imagine themselves as the mothers of Trayvon and place their white children in his shoes? Arguably, if the jurors had been able to do so, Zimmerman would not have gone free.

Anderson Cooper's 16 July 2013 CNN interview with juror B37 revealed precisely these points. The juror clearly indicated that she had dismissed Jeantel as a witness who lacked credibility. However, her description of why Jeantel did not meet the

standard – her communication style, her inability to read cursive writing, her lack of education – concealed the underlying issue motivating this dismissal, race. Furthermore, when asked if she felt bad for Trayvon, she immediately added Zimmerman to the equation, stating that she felt bad for both of them. Indeed her empathy seemed oddly and largely misplaced towards Zimmerman, the armed white male, and not towards Trayvon, the murdered black teenager. The juror went further in tape aired on 17 July 2013 stating that she felt that she knew George Zimmerman and in comparison that she knew little about Trayvon, besides his residence and schooling. Juror B37's vindication of Zimmerman extended to the point of asserting that she felt that he would not pose a threat if he served again in the capacity of a neighbourhood watch captain.

The juror's lack of connection to Trayvon can be explained in part by the racial divide in America, but also by the failure of the prosecution to introduce testimony to humanize the deceased teenager. Cooper's interview also revealed the persuasiveness of some of the defense's trial strategies. Arguably a major prosecutorial error was made in allowing the defense team to present a re-enactment of the crime, one that juror B37 admitted they reviewed during deliberations. What is disturbing, however, is that juror B37 did not seem to approach the re-enactment as a *version* of the events presented by the defense, but instead as the *truth* of what happened that night. That the prosecution did not block the use of the re-enactment or at least ensure the submission of their alternative version of events, was a critical error.

CNN analyst, Mo Ivory, is one of the few people to distinguish between Zimmerman's Latin-ness and his whiteness. It is ludicrous to presume that Zimmerman's Latin background made him immune to anti-black racism. In fact the terms Latino and Hispanic need to be critiqued. In a country like Jamaica or Barbados where British colonization and slavery created deep racial hierarchies, there is no sweeping racial/ethnic term used to signify the experience of shared colonization under Britain. However, in countries like Cuba, Peru and the Dominican Republic, where parallel histories occurred (but under the Spanish) the term Latin is often used to describe the entire population regardless of the vast internal diversity of racial populations. Of course these countries have citizens who are indigenous, Asian, white, mixed and many of African origin. And of course, they suffer from racism due to the ways that race was organized in hierarchies of human value. Therefore, to believe that Zimmerman's Latin origins prevented him from "profiling" a black youth is a ludicrous proposition. Equally ludicrous was the decision of the white female judge, Debra Nelson, to prevent the prosecution from using the adjective *racial* in front of the word "profiling". It effectively tied their hands and made their job of expressing intent for Zimmerman's deadly actions that much more difficult. If the murder was not about racial profiling then where, in an American population of over 300,000,000, are the white Trayvon Martins?

The divide between juror B37 and Rachel Jeantel was fundamentally a racial one, as was the divide between George Zimmerman and Trayvon Martin. I have young black males in my life who live in the USA and I must admit that I am concerned for their safety. But I'd be lying if I said that I'd feel absolutely safe if they were living in Canada, the UK or some other western nation. America is not the only country with the blood of

young black men on its hands. As a black woman, the day after the verdict was surreal. To tell you the truth, I did not expect a guilty verdict. My life to date and the histories that I study have taught me that western justice systems were not constructed to serve people like me.

What do black parents say to their sons in the wake of the verdict...about how to *be* in the world...about how to be safe, live, survive, and possibly thrive? Surely we can see that a so-called post-racial society is not yet upon us. We are still in the midst of a struggle over the deadly legacies of colonial marginalization and racist oppression.