Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Teaching Trayvon

Ulli K. Ryder, Ph.D · Thursday, March 29th, 2012

I am a college professor who often teaches about race and ethnicity. Last week one of my classes reached the point in our syllabus where we were to discuss Civil Rights and Black Power. Having taught this before I know it can be tricky. One of the great things is that my students – most of whom are under 21 years old – have so benefited from the struggles of the 1960s that their lives rarely contain the racial violence of those whom we study. Unfortunately, this makes it difficult to demonstrate the ways racism and racial violence are still prevalent in our society. Trayvon Martin's murder made this reality horrifyingly clear and made the 1960s seem less distant for my students.

Just a few minutes into my lecture on the Black Panther Party and their fight against police brutality, one student raised her hand and asked, "Why isn't the man who killed Trayvon in jail?"

The class, made up of students from a variety of ethnic, racial and national backgrounds – but without a single black male – was, as many of us are, horrified by the facts of the case as we know them thus far. Here are the three main points of discussion and what we learned:

> 1. The comparison with Emmett Till is troubling. While both Till and Martin were young black men killed in southern towns, there are important differences. Till was murdered in 1955 – before the civil rights movement, in a state long-famous for its extreme violence against black people, by white men who assumed he had said or done something to a white woman. Martin was murdered in 2012 – in a nation that claims to be post-racial, by a Hispanic man, while walking home after buying Skittles and a can of iced tea. Emmett Till was murdered during a time and in a place where violence against black males was well-known and expected. Trayvon Martin was murdered in a time and place where many Americans believe that violence against black males has been greatly reduced. Martin's murder exposes what black parents have known for centuries: young black men are at risk every time they leave the safety of their homes.
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> Emmett Till is important largely because of his mother's actions after his murder. Mamie Till Mobley held an open casket funeral so that the world could see what had happened to her child. Her strength helped catalyze the Civil Rights Movement and garnered world-wide attention to the extreme violence of the segregated US south. We can only hope that the murder of Trayvon Martin will inspire such activism and change. On *Weekends with Alex Witt,* the host asked Philadelphia Mayor Michael Nutter (D-PA) what the outcome

would be if George Zimmerman is not convicted of murder. Mayor Nutter side-stepped the question by pointing out that there are a number of factors, including how the trial is conducted, which may influence the public's reaction. But the subtext of the question and the answer was clear: if Zimmerman is not convicted of murder, public outrage may explode and we may have a revisiting of the civil unrest (or riots) of 1965 and 1992.

2. So far, the biggest thing to come out of Trayvon Martin's murder is The Million Hoodie March and pictures of celebrities in hoodie sweatshirts. The sight of so many people in hoodies makes good copy and gives all of us a way to express our horror and sadness. But for many people, wearing a hoodie is synonymous with political activism. It is not. As my classes learn in our discussions of famous activists and political movements, real activism requires real commitment over time. Wearing a hoodie and marching through the streets is a good way to bring attention to the Martin case but we might also feel liberated from the responsibility to pursue further action because we can post pictures of ourselves in hoodies on Facebook and Twitter and feel like we've engaged in something lasting and important. This makes activism a personal act which is as dangerous as believing that racism is a personal act. The kind of activism that leads to lasting change requires mass action – over time – by many people and institutions just like racism, in order to survive and thrive, requires the support – over time – of many people and institutions.

Most importantly, Trayvon Martin was not killed because he was wearing a hoodie. He was killed because he was a young black male and George Zimmerman believed all young black males were dangerous and should be stopped by any means necessary. I understand all the black parents who are confiscating the hoodies from their teenage sons. I understand wanting to believe that if we control what young black males wear they will be safe. But – and this is the most horrible realization – they will not.

3. Which brings me to George Zimmerman. Much has been made about the race and ethnicity of Zimmerman. Two things are readily apparent: 1) most Americans have no idea that Hispanics/Latinos are an ethnicity and not a race and 2) racism infects all of us – not just white people. As people debate whether Zimmerman is "white" or "Hispanic" we have to remember that Hispanics/Latinos are an ethnicity, which means they can be of any race. Therefore, Zimmerman can be both white and Hispanic. But this misses the point. Racism, bigotry and discrimination are not illnesses that only infect white people. Anyone has the potential to hate and fear black males enough to kill them. Nearly 400 years of anti-black stereotyping and violence has permeated our society and created the conditions which led to Trayvon Martin's slaying. As one of my students said "It doesn't matter if Zimmerman is white. You don't have to be white to hate black people."

As I looked out on my students at the end of the class I was struck by the looks on their faces. I am used to my students appearing horrified – this is the usual reaction to discussions of slavery or early 20th century lynching. But on this day my students did not look horrified. They sat, silently, looking full of despair. Trayvon Martin was only a year or two younger than they are. He looked like their friends, relatives, boyfriends. He – like they – grew up in a post-civil rights world where we are told people are judged on the content of their character not the color of their skin. Trayvon's murder showed them the brutal, deadly falseness of this assertion.

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