

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

The Curb and the Color Line

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I was in New Orleans the evening the Zimmerman verdict was announced. I wanted to join in the streets with people the next day, but needed to continue along my summer road trip. I decided to try to find a gathering up the road, and spent the day driving up the Mississippi Delta thinking about how the color line is visible and invisible in this particular landscape. For Du Bois, the “winding and intricacy of the geographical color line varies, of course, in different communities” (1982: 189-190). It varies from physical separation to co-mingling, but the division in consciousness and recognition that the color line imposes—the Veil—is differentially lived by Black and white people, so as to shape what can be seen and even identified as racism: the “half-named Negro problem” (1982: 49).

My longstanding interest in how visibility, or exposure, can be used as a tool for political change was deepened by the Zimmerman trial. I remain fixated on the claim that Zimmerman’s defense made that the curb, in the presence of Trayvon Martin, was a weapon. In his closing statement, defense attorney Frank O’Mara challenged the fact that Trayvon was unarmed:

“But that is cement. That is the sidewalk. And that is not an unarmed teenager with nothing but Skittles trying to get home. That was somebody who has used the availability of dangerous items, from his fists to the concrete, to cause great bodily injury.”

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This reads as a profound statement about the color line in a color-blind nation, where some people are devoted to the idea that we have overcome our racist past. O'Mara was not talking about cobblestones liberated from the streets by revolutionaries in Paris or Berkeley or Cairo. From opening to closing remarks, the defense relied on the logic that a young Black man, in the presence of the sidewalk, spelled danger to others. This logic, most obviously, erases Zimmerman's possession and use of a gun. Zimmerman's lawyers also spoke to the spatial relationality of race that cannot be uttered in an ostensibly post-racial America. The color line continues to divide places by race and delineate who may be where in what circumstances, yet the ideology of colorblindness disavows the relationship of racial rule producing this division even as it continues to half-name problems as spatially isolated (as in 'ghettos') and temporally discrete (as in inheritances from a Jim Crow past).

The curb, then, is a telling metaphor for US contemporary racism. Their very ubiquity—curbs are so commonplace as to no longer be seen—parallels the economic processes and public policies that entrench historic racial and class divisions in American cities and suburbs, but remain invisible to many white Americans, even with the deepening of these divisions since the 2009 economic crisis. The invisibility of these processes and policies seems to make racial lines invisible, but their concreteness makes them durable and deadly. The unspoken message was that there is no safe place for young Black men in the context of a color line that is not supposed to exist.

The white supremacist underpinnings of our nation's cities mean that Trayvon was considered out of place in a gated community. These underpinnings are literally infrastructural (the curb), and have a longer history than the legal enshrinement of Stand Your Ground. Steve Martinot argues that Zimmerman's violence and acquittal are extensions of U.S. colonialism and war-making: "Invasion is self-defense. Self-defense is aggression." Gated communities and

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suburbs are already white property, and exceptions are just that. Trayvon was tried for his *own* murder because he was always already out of place. As Robin D.G. Kelley writes, “Let’s be clear: the Trayvon Martins of the world never had that right because the ‘ground’ was never considered theirs to stand on.” Challenges to the color line from WWII through the 1970s that put an end to the formal segregation of roadways, housing, education, and health care shook the foundations of this logic. In turn, as I write elsewhere, law-and-order urbanism became “the nation’s de facto urban planning policy rather than a program of social investment in collective urban futures” (Lloyd 2012: 436).

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Struggles over histories of white supremacy, slavery, colonialism can be seen throughout the South in explicit commemoration—Memphis’ National Civil Rights Museum, Little Rock’s Central High School, John Brown’s abolitionist insurgency at Harper’s Ferry, and the countless Civil War battlefields and statues to Robert E. Lee and Confederate soldiers. The markers of white supremacy and commemorations of Black freedom struggle have uneven values and divided meanings, yet I hoped that I would find some significance in how people have made struggles visible.

Photography is a challenging tool of visibility, both ambiguous and excessively literal (in my hands at least)—how many Martin Luther King, Jr. street signs in how many cities could I photograph, and what do MLK Boulevards or Jackson’s Medgar Evers airport signify when life expectancy is *declining* in some Delta counties? Within the visual economy of colorblindness and its insistence on equality, how are such honorifics made to symbolize progress and make *invisible* state-backed vigilante policing and the commonsense of Black imprisonment? This question was in the back of my mind, especially following my visit to the National Civil Rights

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Museum (NCRM) in Memphis earlier in the summer. That museum spans two small city blocks comprising the Lorraine Motel, where Dr. King was killed while in the city supporting the striking sanitation workers, and a building across the street from where the deadly shots were fired. Disputes over representing Dr. King and remembering the civil rights movement are well known. Josh Inwood (2009: 88) observes that the history told at Atlanta's Auburn Avenue and the King Center is decidedly liberal and assimilationist, "focus[ing] on the construction of an integrated society, while his radical message of wealth redistribution receives less attention".

Indeed, I had left Memphis feeling like the NCRM situated visitors better as participants in a crime scene investigation than as inheritors of and protagonists in an enduring freedom movement. The portion of the museum displaying replicas of iconic sit-ins and strikes was closed for renovation when I visited, which no doubt contributed to my feeling. Nonetheless, the most engaging parts of the museum that I could visit present James Earl Ray's well preserved hotel room with various artifacts from the murder and subsequent investigations. Visitors move from interacting with evidence and competing scenarios accounting for King's death to an installation on the Department of Justice's Community Relations Service. The agency is presented as 'America's Peacemakers', highlighting their role in addressing racial tensions in Los Angeles and Miami, providing 'conciliation services' at the Million Man March, and facilitating a community dialogue in Jena, Louisiana. No context is provided either for the local context of racial conflict or the national discussions that ensued.

The crime scene tenor of King's assassination ground fits with the dominant narrative of civil rights progress: unlike the Jim Crow era when the state did not act, the museum enacts competent preservation of evidence and due action. Yet, this narrative of steady advancement is precisely what makes the contemporary regime of policing and imprisonment possible, and apparently distinct from our racially backward past. Visitors' seamless movement from investigator of King's assassination to community peacemaker positions them as police arms of

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the state, both appropriating the terms of non-violence and making queries into mass incarceration unthinkable.

Needless to say, I hoped to not see such a crime scene memorialization when I went to McComb, Mississippi, where in 1961 300 students walked out of their high school to protest the suspension of a fellow student for her arrest at a sit-in at the city's segregated Greyhound terminal. The students marched to the McComb City Hall, gathering more demonstrators along the way. Those who attempted to pray on the steps—some 116 of them—were arrested.

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Photo 1: Confederate Heroes statue outside McCone City Hall, dedicated by the McCone chapter of the Daughters of the Confederacy in 1916. McCone, Mississippi.

A large stone statue to Confederate Heroes stands at the rear entrance to the city hall, but the civil rights history of this place is unmarked. I drive across the tracks from McComb's commercial downtown to a tree-lined neighborhood of small homes. The Sunday afternoon heat is keeping everyone indoors, save for the church ladies packing up their cars. I am looking for an empty corner lot where a SNCC Freedom House once stood. It was part of a complex of three houses

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for living quarters and offices for SNCC and the Council of Federated Organizations. It was bombed in 1964.



Photo 2: Site of Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) Freedom House, bombed 1964. McCone, Mississippi.

There is no plaque commemorating this site. My knowledge of the place comes to me virtually from some keepers of civil rights history whom I do not know. I leave this place where violence

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is marked by absence thinking about how living with and sharing this grounded history is about creating a critical common knowledge for the present.

I arrive in Jackson, Mississippi late in the day. With a snack from the local food co-op, I continue down Medgar Evers Boulevard. It is a wide thoroughfare, not heavily trafficked this time of day, and studded with jarring seams and potholes. The local radio station discusses the Zimmerman trial, policing in the city, the need to come together, and then interviews a speaker at the Justice for Trayvon rally, a gathering organized mostly by local college students, which I soon join.

First, though, I arrive at Medgar Evers' home, a modestly sized, brightly painted ranch style, perched between two other 1960s era suburban homes. A substantial historical plaque on the edge of the neatly clipped lawn reads:

“Medgar and Myrlie Evers moved into this home with their children-Darrell and Reena-in 1955 after Medgar became Mississippi’s first NAACP Field Secretary. Son Van was born in 1960. Evers was an outspoken activist for voter registration and social justice. Just after midnight, on June 12, 1963, he was assassinated in the driveway as he returned from a meeting. After his death, the family moved to California and deeded the home to Tougaloo College as an historic house museum.”

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Photo 3: Home of Medgar and Myrlie Evers; Medgar Evers was assassinated here in 1963.
Jackson, Mississippi.

What may not be immediately evident from this photo is that the Evers' home is the only house on the block without a front door. The family hoped this feature would provide a measure of safety from expected violence, explains the [Medgar Evers Tribute website](#).

I am drawn to the flexibility of photographs, their meanings shaped by an interpretative context often provided by juxtaposition. Evers had spent time in McComb, perhaps even at the

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Freedom House. Nothing to photograph here but an absence in the landscape. Does the absence of this house and Evers' front door serve as their own reminders of past violence; if so, who is the audience for such reminders, and what questions do they prompt? What might Evers say about the Supreme Court's reversal of portions of the Voting Rights Act? How do these collective efforts at memory connect the past's 'double system of justice', which has been disavowed (Du Bois 1982:200), from the double system of the present?

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Following the acquittal of Zimmerman, we should all know that the color line has been exposed as ubiquitous, only selectively invisible, and as unremarkable as a sidewalk. Given the material commonplace of curbs, the profoundly disturbing implication is that this logic of colorblindness means there is no place for Trayvon to be or be safe. The notion that the sidewalk is a weapon in the presence of a young Black man rests on this racial, colonial logic wherein self-defense—and simple presence—are treated as aggression.

The militarized and racialized austerity of law-and-order urbanism is the dual weapon responsible for the actual crumbling sidewalks. Justice for Trayvon, and Oscar Grant, and so many others will mean challenging these terms of safety. This goes beyond Stand Your Ground and stop-and-frisk to a militarist ideology that valorizes the 'defense' of the nation's white home as a legitimate state and industrial pursuit.

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