The Stone is a forum for contemporary philosophers and other thinkers on issues both timely and timeless.

I.

“Man, I almost blew you away!”

Those were the terrifying words of a white police officer — one of those who policed black bodies in low income areas in North Philadelphia in the late 1970s — who caught sight of me carrying the new telescope my mother had just purchased for me.

“I thought you had a weapon,” he said.

The words made me tremble and pause; I felt the sort of bodily stress and deep existential anguish that no teenager should have to endure.

This officer had already inherited those poisonous assumptions and bodily perceptual practices that make up what I call the “white gaze.” He had already come to “see” the black male body as different, deviant, ersatz. He failed to conceive, or perhaps could not conceive, that a black teenage boy living in the Richard Allen Project Homes for very low income families would own a telescope and enjoyed looking at the moons of Jupiter and the rings of Saturn.

A black boy carrying a telescope wasn’t conceivable — unless he had stolen it — given the white racist horizons within which my black body was policed as
dangerous. To the officer, I was something (not someone) patently foolish, perhaps monstrous or even fictional. My telescope, for him, was a weapon.

In retrospect, I can see the headlines: “Black Boy Shot and Killed While Searching the Cosmos.”

That was more than 30 years ago. Only last week, our actual headlines were full of reflections on the 1963 March on Washington, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream” speech, and President Obama’s own speech at the steps of the Lincoln Memorial to commemorate it 50 years on. As the many accounts from that long ago day will tell you, much has changed for the better. But some things — those perhaps more deeply embedded in the American psyche — haven’t. In fact, we should recall a speech given by Malcolm X in 1964 in which he said, “For the 20 million of us in America who are of African descent, it is not an American dream; it’s an American nightmare.”

II.

Despite the ringing tones of Obama’s Lincoln Memorial speech, I find myself still often thinking of a more informal and somber talk he gave. And despite the inspirational and ethical force of Dr. King and his work, I’m still thinking about someone who might be considered old news already: Trayvon Martin.

In his now much-quoted White House briefing several weeks ago, not long after the verdict in the trial of George Zimmerman, the president expressed his awareness of the ever-present danger of death for those who inhabit black bodies. “You know, when Trayvon Martin was first shot, I said that this could have been my son,” he said. “Another way of saying that is Trayvon Martin could have been me 35 years ago.” I wait for the day when a white president will say, “There is no way that I could have experienced what Trayvon Martin did (and other black people do) because I’m white and through white privilege I am immune to systemic racial profiling.”

Obama also talked about how black men in this country know what it is like to be followed while shopping and how black men have had the experience of “walking across the street and hearing the locks click on the doors of cars.” I have had this experience on many occasions as whites catch sight of me walking past their cars:
Click, click, click, click. Those clicks can be deafening. There are times when I want to become their boogeyman. I want to pull open the car door and shout: “Surprise! You’ve just been car-jacked by a fantasy of your own creation. Now get out of the car.”

The president’s words, perhaps consigned to a long-ago news cycle now, remain powerful: they validate experiences that blacks have undergone in their everyday lives. Obama’s voice resonates with those philosophical voices (Frantz Fanon, for example) that have long attempted to describe the lived interiority of racial experiences. He has also deployed the power of narrative autobiography, which is a significant conceptual tool used insightfully by critical race theorists to discern the clarity and existential and social gravity of what it means to experience white racism. As a black president, he has given voice to the epistemic violence that blacks often face as they are stereotyped and profiled within the context of quotidian social spaces.

III.

David Hume claimed that to be black was to be “like a parrot who speaks a few words plainly.” And Immanuel Kant maintained that to be “black from head to foot” was “clear proof” that what any black person says is stupid. In his “Notes on Virginia,” Thomas Jefferson wrote: “In imagination they [Negroes] are dull, tasteless and anomalous,” and inferior. In the first American Edition of the Encyclopaedia Britannica (1798), the term “Negro” was defined as someone who is cruel, impudent, revengeful, treacherous, nasty, idle, dishonest, a liar and given to stealing.

My point here is to say that the white gaze is global and historically mobile. And its origins, while from Europe, are deeply seated in the making of America.

Black bodies in America continue to be reduced to their surfaces and to stereotypes that are constricting and false, that often force those black bodies to move through social spaces in ways that put white people at ease. We fear that our black bodies incite an accusation. We move in ways that help us to survive the procrustean gazes of white people. We dread that those who see us might feel the irrational fear to stand their ground rather than “finding common ground,” a
reference that was made by Bernice King as she spoke about the legacy of her father at the steps of the Lincoln Memorial.

The white gaze is also hegemonic, historically grounded in material relations of white power: it was deemed disrespectful for a black person to violate the white gaze by looking directly into the eyes of someone white. The white gaze is also ethically solipsistic: within it only whites have the capacity of making valid moral judgments.

Even with the unprecedented White House briefing, our national discourse regarding Trayvon Martin and questions of race have failed to produce a critical and historically conscious discourse that sheds light on what it means to be black in an anti-black America. If historical precedent says anything, this failure will only continue. Trayvon Martin, like so many black boys and men, was under surveillance (etymologically, “to keep watch”). Little did he know that on Feb. 26, 2012, that he would enter a space of social control and bodily policing, a kind of Benthamian panoptic nightmare that would truncate his being as suspicious; a space where he was, paradoxically, both invisible and yet hypervisible.

“I am invisible, understand, simply because people [in this case white people] refuse to see me.” Trayvon was invisible to Zimmerman, he was not seen as the black child that he was, trying to make it back home with Skittles and an iced tea. He was not seen as having done nothing wrong, as one who dreams and hopes.

As black, Trayvon was already known and rendered invisible. His childhood and humanity were already criminalized as part of a white racist narrative about black male bodies. Trayvon needed no introduction: “Look, the black; the criminal!”

IV.

Many have argued that the site of violence occurred upon the confrontation between Trayvon and Zimmerman. Yet, the violence began with Zimmerman’s non-emergency dispatch call, a call that was racially assaultive in its discourse, one that used the tropes of anti-black racism. Note, Zimmerman said, “There’s a real suspicious guy.” He also said, “This guy looks like he’s up to no good or he’s on drugs or something.” When asked by the dispatcher, he said, within seconds, that, “He looks black.” Asked what he is wearing, Zimmerman says, “A dark hoodie, like a gray
hoodie.” Later, Zimmerman said that “now he’s coming toward me. He’s got his hands in his waist band.” And then, “And he’s a black male.” But what does it mean to be “a real suspicious guy”? What does it mean to look like one is “up to no good”? Zimmerman does not give any details, nothing to buttress the validity of his narration. Keep in mind that Zimmerman is in his vehicle as he provides his narration to the dispatcher. As “the looker,” it is not Zimmerman who is in danger; rather, it is Trayvon Martin, “the looked at,” who is the target of suspicion and possible violence.

After all, it is Trayvon Martin who is wearing the hoodie, a piece of “racialized” attire that apparently signifies black criminality. Zimmerman later said: “Something’s wrong with him. Yep, he’s coming to check me out,” and, “He’s got something in his hands.” Zimmerman also said, “I don’t know what his deal is.” A black young male with “something” in his hands, wearing a hoodie, looking suspicious, and perhaps on drugs, and there being “something wrong with him,” is a racist narrative of fear and frenzy. The history of white supremacy underwrites this interpretation. Within this context of discursive violence, Zimmerman was guilty of an act of aggression against Trayvon Martin, even before the trigger was pulled. Before his physical death, Trayvon Martin was rendered “socially dead” under the weight of Zimmerman’s racist stereotypes. Zimmerman’s aggression was enacted through his gaze, through the act of profiling, through his discourse and through his warped reconstruction of an innocent black boy that instigates white fear.

V.

What does it say about America when to be black is the ontological crime, a crime of simply being?

Perhaps the religious studies scholar Bill Hart is correct: “To be a black man is to be marked for death.” Or as the political philosopher Joy James argues, “Blackness as evil [is] destined for eradication.” Perhaps this is why when writing about the death of his young black son, the social theorist W.E.B. Du Bois said, “All that day and all that night there sat an awful gladness in my heart — nay, blame me not if I see the world thus darkly through the Veil — and my soul whispers ever to me saying, ‘Not dead, not dead, but escaped; not bond, but free.’ ”
Trayvon Martin was killed walking while black. As the protector of all things “gated,” of all things standing on the precipice of being endangered by black male bodies, Zimmerman created the conditions upon which he had no grounds to stand on. Indeed, through his racist stereotypes and his pursuit of Trayvon, he created the conditions that belied the applicability of the stand your ground law and created a situation where Trayvon was killed. This is the narrative that ought to have been told by the attorneys for the family of Trayvon Martin. It is part of the narrative that Obama brilliantly told, one of black bodies being racially policed and having suffered a unique history of racist vitriol in this country.

Yet it is one that is perhaps too late, one already rendered mute and inconsequential by the verdict of “not guilty.”

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