

Only a Pawn in Their Gates



For as much of the media as has been paying attention, George Zimmerman's shooting of Trayvon Martin is being treated as a slightly less gory and premeditated version of the Emmet Till case. A black kid goes to stay with family, and doesn't understand the depth of the local white supremacy. He gets killed by for no intelligible reason, and the white authorities close ranks to protect his attacker. There is a single, clear lesson to be drawn, and it is about race and racism.

Every statement made by the Sanford police so far has encouraged this reading. Chief Lee's daily assertions that he is not a racist are sort of the punchline, but the department has displayed generally suicidal PR instincts. All of the original narratives, including the one that could be assembled from Lee's confused denials, painted a literally black-and-white picture. Zimmerman, an adult universally referred to as white for the first several days of media coverage, had admitted to shooting an unarmed black teenager. The largely white police department then refused to arrest Zimmerman for reasons that could charitably be described as precious. They defended Zimmerman with a variety of claims that seem doubtful, most glaringly the lie that his past record was "squeaky clean". Subsequent involvement by major black leaders and the NAACP have heightened the sense of this case as racial violence, and it is in those terms that every article I have read describes the case.

I have no doubt that this reading is in some large measure correct: it is impossible to understand what happened between Zimmerman and Martin without racism and prejudice, though perhaps in a more nuanced way than the Trayvon-is-Emmet school of responses would suggest. But there are more and better minds than mine doing that analysis. I would like to look elsewhere, not to negate the importance of race in this case, but because I think there are some significant questions left untouched in our rush to turn this tragedy into monochrome.

Like thousands of other Americans, I expect, I had a moment of confusion when I first saw an article about the murder. I saw a photo of a man with a stubbly beard and mustache and fleshy cheeks. He was relatively light-skinned, with short, straight, black hair. He was wearing a shirt with an orange collar, as one often sees in prison mugshots. His age could have been anywhere from a mature-looking 15 to a youthful-looking 35. I do not remember experiencing any cognitive dissonance, but I can reconstruct it in retrospect: here was a case about a white man (Zimmerman) killing a black kid

(Martin). And here was a photo of a man who *clearly would not pass for white in my community*. Had I been shown the picture in some other context, I would have unhesitatingly guessed that he was Latino, but given a black/white dichotomy, I immediately assumed that this was Martin. The red herring of the orange collar no doubt played into my own internalized racism: I associate that orange jumpsuit with black men, not white men. The fact that I already knew Martin had no priors did not enter into this immediate reaction.

In fact, the picture was of Zimmerman, who is indeed Latino, as the media have started to notice since his father wrote a letter to the press, a few days in. But I have not seen any media outlet correct their earlier claim that he was white, or reflect on the matter. It raises a trio of issues that are awkward, even taboo, for white journalists: the vagaries of passing and the racial gaze, the malleable status of Latinos as white or non-white, and the unknown but darkly suggested interactions between any two races neither of which is white. These are each deeply uncomfortable topics for the American media, and ironically they will probably remain so until the happy day when they become less important.

So here, at the outset, we have a fundamental flaw in the black-and-white narrative: Zimmerman wasn't white. But this leads to a series of further questions. It is not impossible, or even unlikely, that a Latino man might decide to kill a black kid for reasons involving racial prejudice. But given the usual algebra, it seems bizarre that Chief Lee (who *is* white) would decide to protect a non-white man who had killed a non-white victim.

From that point, the strictly racial version of the story begins to appear as impinging on a real understanding of what Lee's motives were. There is the matter of Zimmerman's prior: he was charged with "resisting arrest with violence" and assaulting a police officer. The charges were dropped, which I suppose allowed the Sanford police department room for their rather stupid claim that his record was "squeaky clean." This information has been presented in the left-wing media repeatedly, but in a reductive form: there, the only point of interest is that Zimmerman has a past history of violence and that the police department knowingly covered it up.

And yet, if the policemen of America have shown a disposition to protect any group more enthusiastically than they protect white people, it is their habit of protecting other police officers. For a police department to protect a civilian who had previously attacked a police officer is extraordinary. Indeed, given a certain degree of cynicism about race relations in the US, this is really the only piece of the story that qualifies for Harmsworth's test of "man bites dog".

Again, Zimmerman disregarded a fairly explicit request made to him by the 911 operator, that he not follow Martin in his car. The media has portrayed this as evidence of Zimmerman's bias: he was hellbent on confronting Martin. Chief Lee has dismissed the importance of this point, saying that it was not a direct order. Yet few people who have had any interactions with the police will recall them expressing such a cavalier attitude about disobeying "requests", even in a traffic stop, let alone a murder investigation.

So why did the Sanford police department take such absurd political risks to protect Zimmerman, who had just defied their orders, and had a history of attacking cops? We cannot explain this in terms of racial solidarity, and Zimmerman doesn't seem to have any political connections or economic clout. What he had was a context.

Zimmerman was the head of the neighborhood watch for a gated community: The Retreat at Twin Lakes. Such communities occupy an increasingly large amount of jurisdictional space in American society. Their political economies have been lauded by libertarians such as Nozicks as providing a free market for local government structures. Meanwhile, they have been castigated by authors like Evan McKenzie, who point out that gated communities, in general, have been staunchly authoritarian and anti-democratic, and have their roots in racial and class segregation, *a la* the St. Louis plats that were the first "private neighborhoods" in the US.

Twin Lakes is not the plats, by any stretch. Houses start just south of 100k, and HOA dues are

just north of \$100 a month. Moreover, the residents are demonstrably not all white, and there is a neighborhood watch instead of full-fledged private security. In this, Twin Lakes represents a relatively new phenomenon. It is the sort of dilute version of the upper crust that is constantly being marketed to the American working class. You'll never have a beach house in Malibu, but if you work hard, you can have your own Walmart version of a gated community. The yearning for this is not lost on everyone: among the comments on [one of the CNN articles](#) about the case, we find this:

If whites have their own community, we are being racist. But if we go live in a black community, we will be killed and our house burned down. That is why whites can't have their own community.

For that author, the subtext of gated communities as a way to privatize racial segregation is no mystery. But Twin Lakes was, in fact, mixed-race, and raises issues that are not specifically racial, although they intersect with racial politics.

Private neighborhoods generally utilize private security, whether this is commercial or voluntary. Private security represents an existential challenge to the state. And yet, like the mercenaries we now quaintly refer to as “government contractors”, it is an existential challenge bundled with a significant financial incentive. Some 62 million Americans now live in communities that are policed and surveilled on their own dime, and only call on the state for response teams—and then only circumspectly. The savings to the fisc is noticeable.

Again, in the old days of the plats, the police could safely assume that the residents of private communities were their social superiors. They were not going to burgle each other's houses for the silverware or be publically intoxicated: they already had their own houses full of silverware and brandy. It would be unseemly to arrest them for domestic violence, and impossible to arrest them for the wide variety of crimes they might be committing in their office. Since they were already painfully immune to police oversight, it must have been a relief when the 1% decided to wall themselves off and hire their own police. A relief, and, presumably, a humiliation: both emotions are in play. Again, we might note the subtle but significant boost to one's ego that occurs when one no longer has to interact with one's superiors, but only one's inferiors. On the whole, the plats might have been a boon to the average cop on his beat.

But now it is not the 1% but the 20% who have walled themselves off to varying degrees, and the situation has become less tenable. When McKenzie wrote *Privatopia* in 1996, he enumerated the sins of gated communities. They were sins of petty tyranny: the man who was told he couldn't leave his house through the back door, or the lovers who weren't allowed to kiss in their car while it was parked in their driveway, or the endless disputes over paint color and shrubbery. These were symbolic provocations; revealing but in and of themselves trivial to everyone except the involved parties. If anything, they pointed to an odd contradiction of Nozickian logic: in the utopia of libertarianism, apparently almost everyone will elect to live in a dictatorship.

But things are becoming more dire. Last year, Celebration USA, Disney's “perfect town”, had a murder and suicide in the space of one week, making a number of national headlines. And now we have a murder whose proximate social cause is, arguably, not so much racism as the use of inept volunteer private security. Doubtless this is not the first, and will not be the last, such case: again, a fifth of Americans now live in such communities.

Let us return to the Zimmerman / Martin case itself. Much has been made of the fact that the Sanford PD has a past history of misconduct, often with the implication of racial bias. In the case that is most similar to the recent murder, two private security guards shot a black teenager to death in 2006 during a confrontation where their authority was unclear, and were never charged. While both the men in that case had ties of some sort to the police department, they were in fact working as private security.

Perhaps the Sanford PD is unusual in ways that transcend its apparent incompetence. But if not, we are seeing an important pattern here. The state police have a long history of being corrupt, brutal,

racist, and sexist, but they do so within a structure of training and consequences that on the whole has served to stymie those urges from their broadest expression. Private police have no such checks and balances, except insofar as their employers or the state police choose to enforce them. If private police are relegated to a world where no enforceable laws are broken (as in the 20th century), they are merely bell-ringers telling their superiors that “all's well”. But if private police such as we have today are attempting to enforce actual laws against actual petty criminals, all hell will break loose. Zimmerman may or may not have been motivated by racism, but he was definitely motivated by a series of break-ins that had actually occurred in Twin Lakes, and his own despondent sense that “the assholes always get away” and it was *his fault*.

George Zimmerman shot an unarmed kid to death, after a sequence of events that surely involved both men's views of other races and ages, and both men's ideas about the dignity of violence and capitulating to violence. The weight of that guilt is on Zimmerman. But, as Dylan sang so long ago of Medgar Evar's killer, “he's only a pawn in their game”. The Retreat at Twin Lakes put Zimmerman there, with his gun, untrained and demonstrably unsuited for the job. And the Sanford police department backed them up in doing so, because for some complex reason it was preferable to them than patrolling the place themselves. And the entire country is trying to make enough money to file behind the gates of such communities, in the assurance that all *real* crime—and thus all *real* police—can be left on the outside.

Ain't gonna work.

Notes after the move

It is now March, 2015, and we have become depressingly familiar—once again—with stories of unarmed young black men being killed by the authorities. *Dozens* of stories, only a few of which make national headlines. It almost feels as if this has become a meme; as if white police officers are not just acting on orders or instinct, but re-enacting an established narrative. I wrote the piece above before the outcome of Zimmerman's trial, or his series of subsequent crimes and *their* trials. But as many others have pointed out, what is now most disturbing about this sequence of cases is that in no instance is their any question of who killed whom, the usual *whodunnit* that is supposedly the essence of murder dramas. Rather, we have a kind of serialized discussion over which black men deserve to die, and so far, it seems, they all do.

Finally, I want to note that the St. Louis Plats, which I mentioned in the OP as the original version of the gated community, are of immediate relevance to any real understanding of the Michael Brown shooting in Ferguson.