

ARTICLES

#BLACK LIVES MATTER

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“If you’re not careful the newspapers will have you hating the people who are being oppressed, and loving the people who are doing the oppressing.”

—Malcolm X

She rushed downstairs, looking for her phone. On the dining room table somewhere in the midst of books and papers, she found it. As she grabbed the phone, her brisk pace was slowed to a halt. “I cannot believe this,” she muttered, shaking her head in denial. The news feed from the *New York Times* read: “George Zimmerman acquitted in Trayvon Martin killing.” It was hard enough to believe that a volunteer entrusted with keeping the neighborhood secure, fatally shot a seventeen-year old boy who was walking with a packet of skittles in one hand and a can of soda in the other. More shocking was that over a year later the killer had been acquitted. The most incriminating piece of evidence turned out to be his hoodie.

Astounded by the news, she gathered the rest of her things and headed for the door. Finding a parking space after 7:30 a.m. was going to be a hassle, she thought to herself. A fairly mundane thought in the midst of frustration and confusion. As she started the car, NPR’s analysis of this news filled the air. She was immediately drawn into the discussions. Among the many views expressed, even those who were highly sympathetic toward Trayvon viewed this series of events as an exception or an anomaly. Distracted by the radio chatter, she saw the sign for her exit out of the corner of her eye; quickly she took a sharp bend in front of the car in the next lane. She immediately raised her hand as a gesture of apology to the other driver. He looked distressed, apparently not for the mishap that just took place. He waived back. His expression reflected a heaviness of heart as if he were listening to the news as well.

The rest of the commute went by quickly. Without realizing the passing of time, she had reached the campus. There was ten minutes left to find a parking space, go to her office, grab her books, and rush to class on the other side of the campus. The day’s topic was the relationship

between the methods and the respective struggles of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr. She thought to herself that it has been more than 150 years since the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation. Before that, four million black people had been slaves in this country. Millions of others lost their lives in transit from Africa. The advancement and progress of the new world is owed to the arduous labor of those who survived the transatlantic voyage. Tobacco, cotton, rice, rubber plant, and other raw materials were made with their blood, sweat, and tears.

Her thoughts turned to before the Emancipation Proclamation; to the days when one hundred thousand black people died during the American Revolutionary War, and the days when around forty thousand of them lost their lives fighting the Civil War. These tragic pages of history were the driving force behind the struggles of Malcolm and Martin to reach true equality for American citizens, black and white. Although both of them lost their lives while treading this path, their hopes for the future of black people in America seem to be a long way from becoming realized.

She remembered when she was a child she had watched Muhammad Ali (formerly Cassius Clay) on television announcing that he had changed his name, and his religion too. She remembered him telling the story of the time when after his victory in the Olympics and being awarded a gold medal over his Polish and Russian competitors, he went to a restaurant in his hometown of Louisville, Kentucky, sat at the counter, and ordered a hotdog and a coffee. He told the story of how the owner had gestured to one of the waitresses, and the waitress had said to him: "We do not serve negroes." The world's boxing champion who had just won gold medals for his country was not allowed to eat at a restaurant in his own hometown. He had a charming poetic yet funny way of telling the story of how when he was a child he asked his mother why everything good was white and everything bad was black. He asked why Jesus was white? Why the angels were white? Why Tarzan, the king of Jungle in Africa was white? He was also the only one who knew the language of the animals? He had asked why Angel food cake was the white cake and the devil food cake was the chocolate cake? Why the black duckling was considered ugly, and the black cat was the bad luck, and why extortion was called black mail? He said it all very simply yet he questioned the effects of racism not only in the streets, cafes, and bars, or in the media but hinted to the roots of it in the formation of language.

All of these thoughts rushed through her mind. She remembered when, in November 2008, the announcement that Barack Hussein Obama had won the presidential elections drove unstoppable tears down her cheeks as she celebrated with other people who could not hold back their expressions of joy. She thought of Patrice Lumumba predicting the day

of glory and dignity of countries and peoples emancipated from colonialism. The great hero of the Democratic Republic of the Congo and its first legally elected prime minister expressed those hopes about the future of Africa, before he was brutally shot and dismembered by Congolese accomplices and a Belgian execution squad in 1961. His assassination was plotted by both Belgian and the United States governments according to Georges Nzongola-Ntalaja.

Here in America, many were awaiting glory and dignity for people who have long been denied. The 2008 election victory was seen as a great turning point. How devastating and perplexing that during the presidency of a “black man”, black people – men, women, and children – get killed on the streets and in their homes for the crime of crossing the street, playing with a toy gun, shopping at a store, holding up a pen, or selling cigarettes in the street. Those who killed these individuals were the enforcers of the law; the officials charged with the responsibility of ensuring the security of the people. That day, she had not yet realized that Trayvon was not an exception. She could not have imagined that the names of many other casualties would also make headlines: Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Tanisha Anderson, Freddy Gray, Brendon Glenn, Tamir Rice, Jeremy McDole, and more. In fact, most people do not know or do not want to believe that these casualties are simply the few whose names have become known to the general public. They do not know that in the year 2015 alone, approximately 1200 people in the United States were killed by police officers, or that two thirds of these people were black. Just as they did not know that for every ten of these individuals, one would suffer from a mental disorder. Just as most Californians do not know that their state leads the rest of the nation in the number of police killings. They do not know that the number of prisons in the country is more than the number of universities. Even more sobering is that – according to the FBI statistics – two innocent black men, women, or children are killed each week by police. She remembered reading Isabel Wilkerson’s observation that this number equaled the number of blacks who were lynched in the streets during the early twentieth century, without trial and often without even being charged. It was in that period that the black intellectual and peace activist W.E.B. Du Bois declared the color line the problem of the century in his book: *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). He had concluded that capitalism was a primary basis for racism. Du Bois eventually left his country of birth for Africa, where he spent the rest of his life.

She had almost arrived, talking to herself all the while. In a whisper, she uttered: “the specter of racism which Malcolm and Martin lost their lives struggling against, is still alive and well; it has only changed its form.” She found herself at the threshold of her classroom and entered.

Contrary to her routine greetings, she stood there facing the students and bluntly uttered: "How many of you know Leopold II?" Everyone was silent. No one raised their hand. She continued: "How many of you know Hitler?" The entire class raised their hands. "How many of you know the death toll under Joseph Stalin's rule?" A few hands went up. "Who among you knows the number of Indians starved as a result of Churchill's policies?" Only one student knew that about 6-7 million people starved in India during "Winston's War." Surely, the students must know about the 80,000-100,000 Native Americans who were killed in North, Central, and South America. She said: "Let's get back to Leopold II. He was the king of Belgium, crowned towards the end of the nineteenth century." Still, no one raised their hand. Not a single student. Some were taken aback by the seemingly irrelevant question. One of them said: "Professor, did you hear the news about Zimmerman?" She had expected at least a few of them to ask this question. "Yes, I have," she replied. After a pause, she continued: "It is for this reason that I start today's class discussion with this question. I want you to think about the following topic and write a short essay."

"Between the years of 1885 and 1908, policies of Leopold II caused the death of at least 10-15 million Congolese. Why do history textbooks say nothing, or next to nothing, about it?" Students listened closely, as she continued: "What is the relation between this bloody event, its erasure from history books, and the movements of Malcolm and Martin? And finally: Do you have hope that what James Baldwin declared fifty years ago as the perpetual achievement of the impossible in his book *The Fire Next Time* (1963), to become a possibility in the twenty-first century? For those who may not remember, Baldwin had tied the possibility for a real change for black people in this country to radical changes in the American political and social structure." The class fell silent, as she sat down and buried her face in a book, with a disquiet feeling of trepidation and hope.