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State Violence Against Black and Brown Youth

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I first met Emery Robinson at Albert Leonard Junior high school in, New Rochelle, NY. He was two grades behind me, a 7th grader when I was in the 9th grade. He was known as a manchild, not only in terms of size, because he was much bigger than most 9th graders even then, but because he had the physicality and presence of a young man. He could have easily passed for 17 or 18 years old when, by my recollection, he could not have been much more than 11 or 12.

His face, however, betrayed his youth; cherubic, at times shy, an easy laugh and mischievous smile, he was what one would refer to as "not a bad kid," to indicate someone who was a bit mischievous but not malicious. Because of his size he made the basketball team, though it did not seem as if he had a great interest in basketball. He gravitated to kids who were a little older, bolder and who occasionally got into trouble, petty theft, but no violence to my knowledge. In my home town, junior high school was a pivotal point in the lives of many poor and not so poor, black, brown and working class kids from many diverse backgrounds. The ones who smoked reefer first were the first to experiment with hallucinogens, the first to inject cocaine and perhaps heroin and from there, among the first to contract HIV/AIDS, which back then was a death sentence. Emery was spared this fate, this particular end to his life.

By the time I entered high school and then college, I had not seen nor heard about Emery in years, until one day during the summer between my junior and senior year of college I heard and read about his shooting by a Pelham police officer. Pelham Manor is a relatively affluent bedroom community just north of the Bronx, with a much smaller black population than the nearby towns of New Rochelle, Mount Vernon, or Yonkers. Emery was 18 years old when he was shot on July 19, 1979.

According to both police and newspaper reports, Emery was driving a car into Pelham when he was stopped by a police officer on the suspicion of driving a stolen vehicle. Officer John B. Robbins, the officer in question, claimed in court and police deposition that he had attempted to arrest Emery but Emery broke free and ran away from him. After ordering him to stop and unable to chase him across a church parking lot, the officer fired a warning shot into the air and when Emery kept running, fired a shot into the young man's back. Then, and now, I can envision Emery in all his youth, athleticism and long legs, creating distance between himself and the police officer, until the bullet felled him, in the parking lot of a church.

During the subsequent trial, Officer Robbins claimed that he saw a shiny instrument in Emery's hands, which made him fearful for his life, according to his testimony and the defense provided by the attorney representing him. Emery did, in fact, have something in his hand at the moment he was shot. It was the keys to the car he was driving. I do not know whether Emery was, in fact, driving a stolen vehicle. We do know, however, that the police ballistics expert who testified during the trial stated that he found nitrite particles on the back of Emery's shirt, which was consistent with someone who was shot in the back.

An image of Emery from my junior high school basketball team came to mind as I was preparing this brief article, so I decided to begin with them in remembrance, not only of his life, but the thousands of black and brown youth, women and men, who have ended up at the intersection of white anxiety, state power and spatial segregation, across four continents: Europe, the United States, South America and upon the African continent itself.

My goal is not to personalize or gain some vicarious access to the shock, furor and horror over the deaths of Eric Garner, Oscar Grant, or Michael Brown, but to remind and/or inform readers that these recent killings are unfortunately nothing new. Nor are they unique to the United States. Unfortunately, these incidents are all too common in black and brown communities in various parts of the world. They are common among societies that have developed robust economies built on slave and poorly remunerated labor. In the aftermath of slavery and abolition, several industrial revolutions which required menial and manual labor and now into a post-industrial, information and technocratic age, black and brown populations who once seemed essential to many economies are essential no more.

Rather than undergo a statistical and quantitative analysis of the number of violent acts committed against black and brown youth in the United States or elsewhere, I focus here instead on the symbolic, historical and conceptual dimensions of the unfortunate phenomena of state sanctioned violence against black communities, black people and black youth. The killing of unarmed black men is part of a larger problem of the legacies of racial regimes in societies where disproportionately high levels of unemployment and incarceration rates, poor education, spatial segregation and capricious doses of state violence, structure the conditions of marginality which makes violence against these populations not only plausible, but banal. Middle class, even elite members who happen to be walking, talking, shopping and driving while black and brown in various societies have experienced racially-coded harassment, state and para-state violence, part of a larger pattern and history of formal and informal institutional racism. These structuring conditions not only affect labor markets but access to education, professional and personal networks, friends, mates and lovers -- economies in the fullest sense of the term.

The example of Emery Robinson of New Rochelle, NY over 30 years ago, provides an opportunity to travel the world as it were, on a multi-site investigation into the effects of racial regimes upon black and brown populations; families broken and upended by violence and absent loved ones, post- traumatic stress disorder, flashbacks, anxiety, depression, rage and a host of other diseases constituted, in part, in the social world, and thus with epidemiological effects.

Common to populations in France, Brazil, Colombia, Britain and the United States (among other places) is a shared legacy of state and popular scrutiny, surveillance and disproportionate violence visited upon them. Well before 9/11 in the United States and recurrent terrorist attacks in the EU beginning in the '90s, populations ranging from the Maghrebi in France, blacks and Latinos in the United States, Afrodescendentes in Colombia and Brazil, have been considered, in various ways, threats to national and local security. In the United States for example, what many whites would define as new incursions on freedom of speech and seemingly random and idiosyncratic use of coercion, has long obtained in black communities. Ferguson, Missouri which exploded on national and international media this past summer, provided a glimpse of this aspect of the black experience in the United States rarely encountered, much less remembered, by the bulk of the US population. Most black and brown people I know, whether in the United States, Brazil, France, Colombia, Britain and many other nation-states, have an Emery Robinson in their lives. Most whites, with the exception of those who have intimate relations with black and brown people in predominantly white societies, do not have an Emery Robinson in their memories. Recalling a passage from the writings of the Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges, we are our memories.

- **France**: The *Charlie Hebdo* attacks in France earlier this year have helped highlight the legacies of discrimination and exclusion of French nationals of African descent. In October-November of 2005, largely immigrant, communities in north-east Paris rioted in response to the deaths of two youths of North African origin, electrocuted in an electricity substation after being chased by the police. This led to rioting not only in the Paris suburbs, but in various parts of France. The incident underscores the precarious relations between the police and Maghrebi/North African communities. Many people in these communities are in fact VERY French, and many believe that the ideology of republicanism has failed them. When the unrest escalated and spread to other cities, the French government introduced emergency measures to try to restore order. Nicolas Sarkozy, the former French prime minister, who was the French government's interior minister in 2005, referred to the two youths as thugs, and the rioters in the suburbs as the scum of French society.

- **Brazil**: In Brazil, research conducted by the Instituto de Pesquisa Economia Aplicada (IPEA) has determined in 2013 that black and brown male (não-branco, negro) youth are 3.7 times more likely to die violently (homicide). Two of every three people assassinated in Brazil are black men. Other related IGBE data shows that as of 2010, blacks have a higher incidence of experiencing police aggression

(6.5) compared to whites (3.7 percent). Brazil has one of the highest rates of youth killings by police in the entire world. Scholars such as Almir de Oliveira Junior, Veronica Couto de Araujo Lima, and Waisal, have concluded that to be *negro no Brasil* means to be at risk, living in a state of public insecurity. The relation between being black (preto and pardo) and the criminal justice system also bears echoes of other countries and cultures. Blacks in brazil have higher incarceration rates and stiffer sentences than their white counterparts convicted of the same crimes.

- A recent incident in Rio de Janeiro provides a graphic example of the extinguished lives embedded in this statistic. On 21/2/15, three boys were standing on a street corner, two on bicycle, in Favela de Palmeirinha, a neighborhood in the Baixada Fluminense of Rio de Janeiro, joking around, recording each other's gestures with their cell phones. A police car drove by and without warning, police officers began firing gunshots at the three boys. Two were wounded, one mortally. Predictably, the police account claims that the boys were shot in an exchange of gunfire. The phone of the dead boy, which kept recording while he lay on the ground, told a different story, of adolescents simply being adolescents. The boy who survived a gunshot wound to his left arm and stomach also recorded the incident on his cell phone. According to reports, there is no evidence of a weapon of any sort in the possession of any of the boys, other than the claims made by police officers in the police report. "Exchange of gunfire" is common phrasing by police in these situations to justify their brutality on the streets of Rio, to be more specific, in the favelas of Rio.

- **Colombia**: In Colombia, scholars of public health have discovered that ethno-racial identification is a social determinant of public health in their conduct of research controlling for gender, social class, ethnicity and region. In the city of Cali, for example Afrodescendentes are more likely to die violently and prematurely than the total population in the Cauca Valley (17.8 vs. 8.8) and in Cali (63.8 vs. 56.1) Fernando Urrea-Giraldo, Gustavo Bergonzoli Pelaez and Victor Hugo Muñoz Villa describe the production mechanism for social phenomenon as the dynamic interaction between phenotype (external appearance) and genotype (resistance and susceptibility) to attenuate or minimize physical, social, chemical and biological characteristics of individuals making them more or less susceptible to various diseases.

How do we make sense of the history of gendered, racialized violence in societies that have transitioned from economies based in slave labor, industrial, and in some instances post-industrial and increasingly technological? Although the techniques and technologies of violence and surveillance have certainly changed, amplified and transformed over the past several hundred years, perhaps it is the assumptions and symbolic associations that have NOT changed over these years. In societies such as Colombia, France, the United States and Brazil, police officials often have difficulty in considering blacks and members of other non-white minority groups as victims of crime, or as law-abiding citizens, because of the construction of suspicion and assumptions of their criminality.

To reiterate, it is important to situate these practices in a comparative, multi-national framework. These and other instances are the empirical examples of what I have referred to as racial regimes, which encompass negative identification, state and popular surveillance and coercion coupled with exclusion from preferred dimensions of society and polity; education, employment. One of the key ideational components of racial regimes is the construction of suspicion, deployed not only by representatives of state, but by common citizens who have also been socialized to believe that black and brown populations represent dangers to the public good, to the public sphere.

How does it feel to be a threat? How does it feel to know that your life is less valued? How does it feel to know that there are people in your midst who feel and are more privileged than you by the accident of phenotype? How can the privileged be made to understand, that it is the most feared members of the national population are among the most vulnerable? For those interested in global public health, but also being a responsible citizen in so many different countries, the answers to these questions begin with empathy, and has, thank goodness, for so many enraged and organized youth, resulted in politics.

Now would be a good time for anti-racist activists in various parts of the world to compare notes and confer with each other in virtual and real space across national and regional boundaries, to force national governments and multi-national organizations to acknowledge the transnational dimensions of this phenomena. Hopefully transnational mobilization can serve as a call to action against racist state violence in various parts of the world.

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