

The slaying in March 2012 of young Trayvon Martin brings to mind the arrest in summer 2009 of Henry Louis Gates, Jr.: Both outrages seem to have evolved from some non-black, testosterone-driven conclusion that the presence of an African-American male in an upscale neighborhood can mean only one thing: the “other” is here in an “invasion” of “white space” with ignoble intent. It’s the proclivity to speculate regarding intent, hastily and without good cause, that brought on both of these injustices, but the two cases reached national attention only because of blatantly obvious misconduct on the part of the perpetrators and their enablers. In between lie thousands of unexplained instances of African Americans and other minorities subjected to maltreatment, injustice, incarceration, and violence simply for trying to get on with their lives, as Mr. Gates and young Mr. Martin did. Mr. Gates paid with loss of dignity for someone else’s jumping to hasty, ill-founded conclusions. Mr. Martin paid with his life.

Gates, a Harvard professor and well-known scholar, has written a dozen or more books widely read by a diverse audience, including yours truly. These range from the literary-theory *The Signifying Monkey*, which drew undeserved ire from the African-American community, to *Faces of America*, which, based on his television series, presents an entertaining look at genealogy and human roots via DNA analysis. One evening as he was turning the key to his Cambridge home, a white neighbor called the cops and he was arrested. So devastating was the racial profiling in the police report, the Boston Globe scrubbed it in its printed version. Some readers’ comments wondered if the Gates arrest was another “birther” reaction to the election of an African-American president.

The teenaged Traynor Martin was guest in a home within a gated Florida community when he was shot dead in the street while trying to reach that home. His confessed murderer, George Zimmerman, a “neighborhood watch” vigilante, first claimed that Mr. Martin attacked him and that he acted in self-defense. Arrest on murder charges obtained only after investigators finally deigned to verify the cell-phone conversation young Martin conducted during the last moments of his life. Days before his murderer’s April 11 arrest, while a slew of newspaper columnists spoke sympathetically of George Zimmerman’s “mistake,” NBC’s Today morning-news show aired a taped call from Mr. Zimmerman to police that made the shooting appear unintentional. What NBC aired turned out to be an edited version of the tape.

The cell-phone evidence shows Mr. Martin talking to his girlfriend as he returned from his trip to a nearby convenience store, on foot toward the home and its owners who hosted him. In talking to the young woman he said he was being followed in a menacing way. His conversation partner urged him to hurry and get inside the house quickly, but picking up the pace only served to further rouse the rage of his shadower, who murdered Mr. Martin within 750 yards from the home he was trying to reach. Earlier, Mr. Zimmerman made much of Mr. Martin’s allegedly suspicious attire, a point eagerly dilated upon by the media. However, Mr. Gates’ clothes (presumably expensive—he likes to dress well) didn’t save him the ignominy of the 2009 arrest; hence, we may conclude it wasn’t the hooded sweatshirt that roused Mr. Zimmerman to murderous action, it was Mr. Martin’s black skin.

Some scholars regard the history of all societies, from feudal to capitalist, the venue of bloody and unrelenting class struggle. Not only the ignoble suffering of individuals but also wars, famines, and genocides spring from the effects of unjust social systems. Such were the

conclusions of Karl Marx, who captured his thoughts 170 years ago in a series of then-provocative books. The problem with the “socialist” approach: it reduces humans to the status of history’s pawns, acting unthinkingly on either side of the divide. Yet social movements originate in the minds of individuals, be they the crusades and religious wars that devastated medieval Europe or the “Greed is Good” Wall Street ideology that has gained traction in some mainstream American beliefs. As individuals we must hold ourselves accountable, not only for our (mis)deeds but also for the flawed thinking that gives rise to these acts. It’s the thinking—including the unquestioned following of inner impulses on the basis of some manufactured justification—that bears examination as we encounter (and contribute to) the ethnic and gender injustices within the American system today.