

THE BOUNDARIES OF MURDER

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In most cultures, no matter how complex, people, like their animal forebears, erect boundaries and define territory, putting even the innocent trespasser in serious jeopardy. Michael Griffith was merely strolling in the Jones Beach area of New York, Yusuf Hawkins, also in New York, looking to buy an automobile, the young athlete in the movie *Boys N the Hood* inadvertently bumping into a stranger. Innocent behavior, but as the portentous saying goes: they were in the wrong place at the wrong time.

If these and numerous gang related murders teach us anything, it is that America in the 1990's acts, at times, no differently than cultures anthropologists once dared to label "primitive." Everywhere in the world, one discovers groups of people preserving clearly demarcated boundaries as well as customs, language, art and values that remain utterly distinct from groups living less than a mile away. And God help the trespasser or accidental tourist.

In Boston, a thirteen year old boy touches the corner of a three family wood frame house, and utters the words, "Don't put your face in that place!" This innocuous corner marks the boundary between territories of rival gangs. It may be safe to walk here during the day--although never at night--but you had better not do (drug) business on the other guy's turf, or you may wind up dead.

Deep within a culture, neighborhood and human personality, lies a mysterious and yet palpable sense of boundaries. This sense, moreover, appears to be an indelible ingredient of racism, bigotry and competition, inherited, possibly, from our animal ancestors.

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The signs of these boundaries are omnipresent, but significantly, their origins lie partly in our psyches and experience. And complicating our understanding of these boundaries, ironically, is the role they play in shaping our identities.

One morning, the baby discovers that by crying her mother will attend to her. In this instant, she learns not only that she can effect behavior, but that an important boundary separates her from mother. She is not, as she once "imagined," part of mother. While at first the discovery may not please her, the newly perceived boundary in fact differentiates her from mother as well as mark the commencement of her individuality. No longer psychologically fused with the mother, she has taken a momentous developmental step, although she will forever be simultaneously attracted to and repelled by the idea of once again fusing with someone or something.

Later developmental steps will involve the emergence of her identity, which in turn will be influenced by her discovery that she is different from other people and objects. Still later, boundary differentiations will emerge along gender, ethnic and racial lines, and further define her singular identity. Early on, she may laugh at these differences, minimize them with that ubiquitous phrase, "Under the skin we're all alike," or perhaps mock those she views as different. But while differentiating herself from "them," she also may fear that she could become "them" or at least contain pieces of "them."

From psychoanalytic theory we learn that human boundaries are conceived and preserved so that individuals may feel protected

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from an instinctual fear that ultimately they might be fused with or even devoured by someone they perceive to be different.

Boundaries, in other words, keep the outside from getting in as well as the inside from getting out.

Utterly primitive, these feelings are confirmed by the instinctually generated notions held about those on the other side of the boundary. We need only conjure up the beliefs about those "different" people's extraordinary sexual capacities or physical attributes to appreciate how irrational we can become, and how human perceptions are effected by instincts. How often do we hear stories of people who by day work to reinforce racial boundaries, but at night cross these same boundaries to mingle with those specially endowed men and women.

In reaction to our ambivalence toward fusing, we safeguard boundaries in three ways. We *assault* trespassers, *impute* negative attributes to them, or openly *oppress* them. In these ways we keep them out of our communities as well as our thoughts, and feel satisfied that for the moment anyway, that they along with our own instincts have been silenced and we are safe.

From the perspective of a so-called civilized culture, gang related murders are unconscionable. There can be no justification, no tolerance for them. At the psychological level--not to excuse the action--we detect primitive instinctual boundary marker behavior, and thereby can understand, in sanguine moments, how it could be that a killer or rapist has little or no explanation for his deed.

The tragedies constituting the nightly urban death reports are self evident. In most all American cities, children lie dead in the

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streets. This fact indicates clearly that the culture, through its politics, institutions, morality and ethos, fails to counteract or neutralize our most primitive instincts. Given their murder, molestation and rape rates, other cultures, apparently, do far better.

Said differently, because we continue to believe that a certain person or group represents an inferior sub-species, too many people imagine that merely by being black, or white, or female, or gay, or a member of a rival gang, someone is trespassing on both external and internal boundaries. The reaction too regularly is murder, an act jungle beasts wouldn't find at all surprising. Human beasts, on the other hand, presently seem either inured to the acts, or unwilling to address their social and psychological roots.

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