

Column: Black and White



X-rays and other imaging studies used in medical investigations are generally black and white depictions of bone, blood, spinal fluid and other body materials. Dyes, magnetic chemicals and other such enhancing agents may be used to see fine details or specific activities, but the pictures generated even with these additional materials are still for the most part merely black and white photographs or computer-generated images.

In some cases, it is easier to see a specific detail when the image is reversed from black and white to white and black. In that case what would ordinarily be seen as white material, such as a bone on a plain X-ray, is seen as black material contrasting with a white background. This “reverse” technique is especially helpful in interpreting imaging studies of the brain and spinal cord, such as MRI studies.

What may be exceedingly subtle to our eyes on a routine image may be fairly obvious on a “reverse” study. The problem with detecting the abnormality without this gray-scale reversal is with our eyes and our brains, rather than with the machine. The machine shows the problem whether we ask it to show it in black and white or white and black, but we may be blind to it unless we switch the image to an unfamiliar contrast.

This vision problem applies to human activities, as well as to MRI imaging studies. Consider the following scenario. A white man is observed entering an ungated

construction site. He enters a house under construction that has yet to have its doors installed and is noted to be walking about on the ground level. He exits the partially built house and starts running.

He is not carrying any material from the house, and his light clothing does not suggest he has any weapons or burglary tools. He runs down the street of a primarily black neighborhood and finds that he is being followed by three black men in a pickup truck bearing black power symbols. The three black men intercept him as he is running, and one of the men orders him to stop as he points a shotgun at the white runner.

The white runner tries to deflect the shotgun, and the black shooter fires the shotgun at pointblank range into the white man's chest. In fact he fires the shotgun three times into the white man, hitting him twice, and the runner falls to the ground. Neighbors in this primarily black neighborhood call the police in response to the commotion.

Two black police officers respond. The first on the scene sees the gravely wounded white man on the ground and takes a statement from the black man with the shotgun and from his two associates. The wounded white man still exhibits some movements and is presumably still alive, but the first officer takes no action to assist him or to determine if the wounded man might still survive the blasts that have torn his chest open.

A second black officer arrives and both of the policemen provide comfort and reassurance to the three black men involved in the shooting. The policemen insist that they understand the situation the three black men faced and can see how the shooting was justifiable. No arrests are made at that time. Any sane or sensible person would deem this scenario absurd. The actions and outcome described are inconceivable in 2021 America.

In the case of Ahmaud Arbery, the shooter and his associates were white and the murdered man was black. The pickup truck bore the confederate battle flag emblem. The policemen were white, and the neighborhood was primarily white. Otherwise, the

events that occurred in Georgia in February 2020 are as described in the “reverse” color scenario outlined above. No arrest warrants were issued for the three white men involved in the chase and shooting until April 2020 when the Georgia Bureau of Investigations looked into the incident.

In the reverse color scenario, most Americans would expect the black assailants to face speedy justice and to request plea deals to avoid the death penalty. Georgia ranks fifth in the United States in terms of court-sanctioned execution carried out over the past three and a half centuries. The number of lynchings and other fatal actions against black men and women in the state is unknown.

The Arbery case was a killing that may yet fall into the category of an acceptable murder under Georgia law. The Georgia law at the time of the shooting was a minor modification of the fugitive slave act. It allowed virtually any citizen to apprehend and detain an individual they suspected or felt should be suspected of a crime, even if deadly force was required to achieve that objective.

That these three white men chased, shot and killed a black man out for exercise is not even open to question. The events were filmed. There was no evidence he had committed a crime, and there was no evidence he posed a threat to the three men chasing him. Numerous other individuals were observed on surveillance videos exploring the construction site, and some of the white ones were actually observed taking building materials.

After all the obfuscation by defense attorneys, two simple conclusions are inescapable: 1) these three white men felt entitled to chase and point a shotgun at a black man and fire it into that black man’s chest, and 2) if the skin colors of the perpetrators and the victim were reversed, the jury would not even bother leaving the room to deliberate before declaring the perpetrators guilty and sentenced to death.

I, like many Americans, have been drawn by curiosity to explore an ungated construction

site. Some of my neighbors and relatives have even taken the liberty to appropriate materials left unsecured at such sites, and many others go jogging through unfamiliar neighborhoods. If these are capital crimes with enforcement and punishment for these crimes left to the discretion of lethally armed men in pickup trucks, then we have ceded all semblance of justice.

In the final analysis, these three men killed a fellow American because they believed the law allowed them to be judge, jury, and executioners. If the court proceedings in Georgia indicate that they were correct, we shall all face a future in which racial prejudice and a thirst for power over our differently pigmented fellow Americans eviscerate an already flawed judicial system.

Dr. Lechtenberg is an Easton resident who graduated from Tufts University and Tufts Medical School in Massachusetts and subsequently trained at The Mount Sinai Hospital and Columbia-Presbyterian Medical Center in Manhattan. He worked as a neurologist at several New York Hospitals, including Kings County and The Long Island College Hospital, while maintaining a private practice, teaching at SUNY Downstate Medical School, and publishing 15 books on a variety of medical topics. He worked in drug development in the USA, as well as in England, Germany, and France.