

Trayvon Martin, Race, and American Justice

Writing Wrong

Kenneth J. Fasching-Varner,
Rema E. Reynolds, Katrice A. Albert and
Lori L. Martin (Eds.)

Foreword by Tyrone Howard



SensePublishers

Trayvon Martin, Race, and American Justice

TEACHING RACE AND ETHNICITY

Volume 1

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Writing Wrong

Foreword by Tyrone Howard

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ADVANCE PRAISE

Trayvon Martin, Race, and American Justice: Writing Wrong

The cold-blooded murder of Trayvon Martin cracked the world open once more, and this smart, comprehensive collection pursues every fissure and follows every fracture into the American heart of darkness. The presumption of innocence is encoded in law, but it's so much more: it's the generous assumption that we expect to find the best and not the worst in one another, and, indeed, in our students and in every proximate stranger. Black youth have an opposite experience, also encoded in law and practice and history and conjecture: they are alleged guilty until proven innocent. *Trayvon Martin, Race, and American Justice: Writing Wrong* strikes a perfect balance between rage and hope, and offers fresh perspectives on every page; its insights and lessons will be mined for years by teachers, parents, youth workers, and anyone concerned about the sorry state we're in regarding the future of young men of color, and the pathways we might pursue toward enlightenment and liberation. This text is an invitation to a rebellion—the inevitable insurgency of Black youth brewing right now across the land as the descendants of enslaved workers step up to exercise their agency, and at that moment become agents of liberty and actors in history.

– ***William Ayers, Retired Distinguished Professor University of Illinois – Chicago***

The murder of Trayvon Martin and acquittal of George Zimmerman serves as a crucible for interrogating how race works in today's post-civil rights era. Working from diverse perspectives, the authors in *Trayvon Martin, Race, and American Justice: Writing Wrong* offer incisive and vivid examinations of the contours of white supremacy today, inviting readers into a much-needed discussion of moral questions surrounding the very foundation life in the U.S.

– ***Christine Sleeter, Professor Emerita, California State University Monterey***

“*Trayvon Martin, Race, and American Justice: Writing Wrong* is a powerful assemblage of voices that speak to the salience of race, gender, and their intersection. Collectively, the authors provide us with poignant reminders of the multiple forces that rail against Black males in our society. Each chapter grabs our attention, ignites our activism, and encourages us to remain steadfast in the struggle toward a true democracy for all Americans – a society where Black males' lives are valued and they no longer face daily threats to their humanity.”

– ***Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz, Assistant Professor, Teachers College, Columbia University***

“While motivated by Trayvon Martin's unfortunate and tragic death, this impressive collection serves as a one-of-a-kind tribute to Martin and will help to keep his legacy alive. The contributions are evocative and accessible, and while the focus is on Martin, the contributions also call attention to mundane, severe, and systemic racial wrongdoings, biases in existing research, colorblindness and white privilege, and erasures of history and failures of memory.”

– ***Tony E. Adams, Professor at Northeastern Illinois University and NCA book award winner***

“The editors and contributors have taken a tragic topic and presented it in a way that is engaging, effective, and surprisingly optimistic. There is a style for everyone here, making it a great text for multiple audiences and classrooms. A truly superb addition to any classroom and a great read for those interested in social justice in today’s world.”

– **U. Melissa Anyiwo, Professor and Coordinator of African American Studies, Curry College**

“*Trayvon Martin, Race, and American Justice: Writing Wrong* is true to its title; it focuses attention—through critical writing—on the pernicious, pervasive, and persistent violence waged against black men, especially black male youth, in American society. Using the still-unpunished pre-meditated murder of Trayvon Martin as a highly emblematic example of this violence, the editors and authors use carefully crafted and sequenced poetry and prose to write truth to power about the economic, political, social, and cultural factors that produce and reproduce systemic aggression toward especially men and boys of African descent, but also toward members of other societally minoritized groups.

The breadth and depth of the contributions included in *Trayvon Martin, Race, and American Justice: Writing Wrong* makes it a particularly valuable resource for faculty and students engaged in teaching, learning, research, service, and activism related to issues of race, racism, blackness, whiteness, class, caste, classism, language, dialect, literacy, linguicism, geographic and national origin, immigration status, sex, gender, gender identity and expression, masculinity, sexual orientation, size, appearance, and, more broadly, equity, equality, and social justice.

Chapters reflect the thoughtful insight and advanced expertise of their authors, who bring increased levels of complexity to historical and contemporary dialogue, discussion, and debate about especially race and racism in the United States. The editors’ selection of contributors and organization of contributions balances pain truth-telling with hope and possibility for a more just future. In sum, *Trayvon Martin, Race, and American Justice: Writing Wrong* reciprocally links theory and practice relating to issues of power, privilege, oppression, discrimination—and liberation.”

– **Christine Clark, Professor & Senior Scholar in Multicultural Education, and Founding Vice President for Diversity and Inclusion, University of Nevada, Las Vegas**

“Chapters in this timely and probing book stare straight at a difficult incident, refuse to ignore injustice, but call on a higher purpose of great academic criticism in “writing the wrong.” Here the wrong is the corrosive and sometimes lethal bias by many in power toward black males, who are too often seen as dangerous and disposable in American society. The killing of Trayvon Martin and the subsequent acquittal of his killer George Zimmerman are examined by minds informed by reflection on theory and history. We hear of conversations that black parents, particularly mothers who often felt on trial themselves, had with their teenage sons. Some of these endangered sons were outraged by the act and verdict, while some others were indifferent. Chapters are devoted to the incident, the trial and aftermath, and to the future of the struggle against racial injustice. Through what T. J. Yosso calls “resistant capital” we are urged to continue to interrogate a judicial system that prosecutes not only black males but their parents and families. There is much to learn here about the current state of social justice and the way we live with and among each other. In both prose and poetry these impassioned authors strive to write the wrong of Trayvon Martin and many others like him. I recommend this volume highly and will use it in my graduate classes.”

– **AG Rud, Distinguished Professor, College of Education, Washington State University**

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TYRONE HOWARD

FOREWORD

Next year marks the 60-year anniversary of the brutal murder of Emmett Till. The tragic nature of Till's death displayed before an entire nation and the world the horrors of racism to see how Black male bodies, and what they represent, were deemed as threats to a particular social order. In many ways, it forced the United States to confront its racist realities, and it posed many age-old questions about the value of Black life. Though many would be reluctant to admit it, Black bodies and lives have always been fundamental to the United States' moral, political, social, and economic fabric. While the nation has often been conflicted about how to deal with its citizens of African descent, especially its males, one cannot deny the invaluable role they have played in the development and maintenance of the world's most powerful nation. The United States' paradoxical relationship with males of a darker hue has been painful, confusing, dehumanizing, and at times celebratory. But what has been persistent for the better part of four centuries is that Black maleness in all of its totality has often been viewed as a menace. The lynching of hundreds of thousands of Black males during the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries, the use of Black males as chattel slavery to build the economic foundation of the nation, Reconstruction and Jim Crow laws have had devastating social, political, and economic effects on Black communities and families. America has not always been kind to its Black male citizens.

The impressive collection of scholars in this volume poignantly remind us that race, class, and gender have always been part of the United States' DNA, and that they remain as pertinent today as ever. In a nation that promotes ideals such as egalitarianism, justice, equality and freedom, these scholars remind us that injustice, prejudice, colorblindness, white privilege, and fear are also core ideals of the United States, and they must be identified, analyzed and eradicated. As the quest for justice has unfolded, marginalized populations have made countless efforts to have their humanity affirmed in order to dismantle stereotypes that exclude and hate. This brings us to the tragedy that is the death of Martin. The tragic death of Martin, much like the death of Emmett Till over half a century earlier, raised the ugly, painful, yet always looming reality, of how race, class, and gender continue to matter in our society. At the turn of the 20th century, DuBois suggested that the problem of the 20th century would be the color line. On hundred years post DuBois' call, many thought that, the nation would have figured out its color line problem, and would be prepared to move to its first post-racial epoch. Needless to say, the Martin tragedy reminds us that we are not there. It should be noted that progress among race relations has

FOREWORD

occurred; yet our inability to look past race remains elusive. Much of what we deal with today is a more sophisticated and nuanced form of racism. No longer are we dealing with barking dogs, water hoses, the looming presence of Jim Crow, and legally segregated schools and lunch counters. Today's reality is influenced by racial profiling, police brutality, educational exclusion, and structural inequalities that create massive economic and social disparities amongst citizens, and when individuals are unable to move up the socioeconomic ladder, we blame them for their failure to 'succeed' in a meritocratic society. Moreover, this current era of racial realities remains steeped in an ideology that equates Blackness with being criminal. Much of what happened to Martin was set in motion centuries ago; the idea that Blackness has always been synonymous with crime, and that a 17 year-old Black male wearing a hoodie must be guilty of some type of criminal activity has become normalized. Racial profiling, fear of Blackness (and Brownness), and a historical legacy of race and crime created the context for Martin's death. The writers of this book address this issue head on from a multitude of angles.

In 1884, Nathaniel Southgate Shaler, a noted Harvard scientist and renowned writer on race relations of that time, stated that the United States had a major problem where race and crime were concerned, namely with Black people. About Blacks, Shaler (1884) stated, "There can be no sort of doubt that, judged by the light of all experiences, these people are a danger to America greater and more insuperable than any of those that menace the other great civilized states of the world." (p. 696) In short, thinkers and writers of the time helped to create a narrative that being Black posed a problem, and that being Black posed a threat to the sanctity and purity that was/is America. In short, messages such as Shaler's helped to create an atmosphere of fear, ignorance, and hate that remains with us today, and many would say these three ingredients contributed to Martin's untimely death.

To further emphasize the race, crime, and fear nexus consider fifteen years ago when Enis Cosby was tragically murdered on a Los Angeles highway. Cosby's mother Emille Cosby boldly stated, "America taught my son's killer to hate Blacks" (Cosby, 1998, p. 2). Elaborating on the persistent presence of racism and how it has had a long lasting influence on the health, safety, and well-being of Blacks, Cosby cited from Baldwin's (1985) "Price of the Ticket": "The will of the people, or the State, is revealed by the State's institutions. There was not, then, nor is there, now, a single American institution which is not a racist institution." (p. xvii) Martin's death resurrects the ugly reminder of how race and racism remain ever present in the United States. The scholars in this work take the task of trying to peel back the complex layers that explain the intersection of race, class, and gender in the United States. This is not a new topic, but it is one that continues to take on new shapes and forms in complicated ways.

Like Sean Bell, Jordan Davis, Amadou Diallo, Patrick Dorismond, Oscar Grant, Tim Stansbury, Ousmane Zongo, and Ramarley Graham before him, Martin should be alive today. The tragedy is that these young men are no longer with us because they represent an identity, created, and sustained within the context of U.S. life, law,

and culture, that Black masculinity in all of its manifestations is to be feared, loathed, despised. Furthermore, when there is a perceived threat it is to be eliminated, while also being protected under the law. As David Stovall tells us in this text, Black youth are often deemed as disposable, and that is a reality and a narrative that must change. Nina Simone inspired us to embrace the beauty of what it means to be young, gifted, and Black. Today we must come to grips with the sobering reality of what it means to be young, male, and Black.

As we seek to identify answers as to why Black males continue to be viewed in many circles as public enemy #1, the group of scholars assembled in this work helps us to unpack the theoretical underpinnings that explain the inexplicable. They write in a bold yet unapologetic manner about the pervasiveness of whiteness, the viciousness of racism, racialized constructions of safety and space, distorted notions of justice, and the process of ‘writing the wrongs.’ In this book we are urged to craft a new narrative that reframes what it means to be Black and male. The authors remind us that it is time to craft a new narrative, which problematizes whiteness, and demonstrates how it manifests itself in harmful and destructive ways in the 21st century. This important volume challenges us to craft a new narrative that unpacks implicit bias, colorblind racism, and reveals the ways that it is embodied by fair, open minded citizens of this country, many of whom assume critical tasks such as educating children, authoring legislation, and enforcing the law. The writers ask us to replace the narrative of young Black males as violent predators and replace it with one that humanizes them and keeps them safe and alive. They also remind us that education scholars and practitioners play important roles in crafting this new narrative. And finally, to their credit, the editors implore us to craft a new narrative that reminds us that harsh racial realities remain enmeshed in our nation’s psyche. The scholars in this work challenge us to think deeper, more critically and historically, and remind us of how far we have to go to embrace all of our citizens.

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The killing of Trayvon Martin profoundly changed a nation, and also ignited a spirit of activism and race consciousness among a generation far removed from the marches and sit-ins of half a century ago. The sanitization of the historic struggle for the restoration of civil rights and human dignity to all Americans was ironically given new life as news spread that Trayvon’s life was tragically taken away. We honour and acknowledge the Trayvon Martins of the world, both named and unknown. We hope this volume serves as a catalyst for re-imaging and creating a society where all life is valued. May we have the courage of Sybrina Fulton and Tracy Martin to never remain silent in the face of injustice.

ANTHONY HILL

A PRAYER FOR AFRICAN BOYS

For Successful Transition to Manhood

God help us,
to be strong Black men.
Role models with our actions as well as our words.
Help us to protect, respect our women, family,
elders, community, and each other.
God, give us a vision.
If we cannot do any good, let us do no harm.
Let your will be done in us.
Help us to submit to your will.
We know that you have a special plan for our lives.
Help us to realize that it is better to build up than to tear down.
Help us to refrain from criticizing, putting down, or destroying
the character or reputation of others.
And to always remember to encourage, uplift, and support
each other in all positive endeavors.
Help us to make this world a better place than we found it.
Bless us Lord!!!
AMEN

FREQUENCY

THE 7 DEADLY AMERICAN SINS

Of the 7 deadly American sins
Being Black has become numbers 1-6

If this statement strikes you as radical, you haven't been paying attention
So let's be clear

George Zimmerman was never on trial
He murdered a child while we were more concerned with whether a boy had smoke
in his lungs, than the fact that he would never again use them to raise his chest
beneath the cloaked hoodie the Grim Reaper lends Black boys

All over the nation people claimed this wasn't a race issue
That the outcome was legally "on-par"
Accusing the left-leaning liberal Blackjack dealers of playing the race card

They asked

"What would've happened if Zimmerman were Black? Would things be different?"

Of course if Zimmerman were Black, this would have ended with a prison sentence
Ask Marissa Alexander about specifics I'm missing
Because she's sentenced to more time in prison than Trayvon spent on this planet

We live in a world where someone can be set free
After admitting to the slaying of an unarmed teen
And CBS News has the audacity to headline a piece by Zimmerman's brother
stating George would spend the rest of this life looking over his shoulder because,

"There are people that would want to take the law into their own hands"

It's funny how some things are Black and white while others taste like the rainbow
Red like the blood staining the sidewalk when he fell
After being profiled for walking too slowly
Yellow for the son of Tracy and Sybrina that shone by day
But by night had stopped glowing

THE 7 DEADLY AMERICAN SINS

Green for grass-stained pants that hung low and heightened sensitivities without
knowing

Brown for an identity Zimmerman played up for the all-white
Sorry

There was one Latino so that's what we'd call a diverse jury
white for the privilege Zimmerman wore
When he was out doing his neighborhood patrolling

And Black

Black is just another name for the numbers 1-6 of America's 7 deadly sins

The 7th was believing we would find justice in the hands of a system that pioneered
Native American oppression

The enslavement of African people
Carried out forced deportations even though we know who's really illegal

But despite these conflicting things, when the verdict came in
All I heard were the words of Dr. King

Calling for us to not allow the deafening noise of injustice
To drown out the sounds of freedom's ring
So in honor of his legacy I ask you this one thing

Please join me in this final call to let freedom ring

Let freedom ring from the graves of Emmett Till, Fred Hampton, Amadou Diallo,
Sean Bell, Oscar Grant, Trayvon Martin, Jordan Davis and all the brothers whose
names we'll never know because even in 2013 a Black man being killed *STILL*
isn't enough to make it onto the evening news

LET FREEDOM RING

Free at last
Free at last

Dear God Almighty

This isn't the freedom for which we've asked

KENNETH J. FASCHING-VARNER, LORI L. MARTIN,
KATRICE A. ALBERT & REMA E. REYNOLDS

1. INTRODUCTION

Writing Wrongs in Post-Racial American Justice

On the night of February 26, 2012, Trayvon Martin, a then seventeen-year old Black teenage male was shot to death in Sanford, Florida. We came to learn that Martin, unarmed and carrying only a bag of Skittles and an iced tea, was shot dead by George Zimmerman, a then 28-year-old, white Latino male of Peruvian heritage who served as a neighborhood watch volunteer. Martin's murder brought to the surface questions about the role of race in the United States in the allegedly post-racial 21st century. The case also presented a number of complexities about controversial stand-your-ground laws. Taken together, issues of race as applied in stand-your-ground cases generally, and in the case against Zimmerman in Martin's death specifically, created a firestorm of perspectives that at their core reveal the social problematics of race (Fasching-Varner, 2009) that trace back centuries. The months, and in fact the better part of two years, following Martin's death brought highly contested conversations, speculations, news articles, media reports, and ultimately a trial where many of the facts involved in this case were disputed. What is not in dispute was that on that rainy evening one person-emboldened by what McIntosh (1989) described as a knapsack of unearned privileges along with a loaded weapon, shot and killed an unarmed teenager (Gabbidon & Jordan, 2013).

Leading up to and throughout the course of the trial, many took to social media outlets to express their perspectives on the case. Within academic circles, particularly for academics working in the areas of social justice and race, there was a hope through all of the deliberations that justice would be served to hold Martin's killer accountable. Many of us thought that a jury would see through the rhetoric and antics. Martin, unarmed, was walking in a community where he had the right to be; he was followed, stalked, and hunted; the police instructed Zimmerman to back down and not pursue Martin; despite these circumstances Zimmerman engaged Martin in a physical confrontation, that by many accounts, and the context of his pursuit, would suggest that he, not Martin, provoked the incident. By the end of the physical altercation, Zimmerman pulled out a pistol and shot Martin dead. We thought 'the jury would have to convict Zimmerman, particularly in the allegedly colorblind post-racial society, no?' The trial itself proved to be a comedy of errors; the jury convicted Zimmerman of no crime, and appeared in post-verdict interviews

to indict Martin for his own death, revealing the racial politics associated in our 'post-racial' moment.

Following the verdict, our internet-enabled devices figuratively blew up. Social media, text messages, and calls continuously expressed outrage over the verdict. While the jury may not have been informed with the requisite academic knowledge about how race operates within the United States, academics did possess that knowledge and took to the internet to communicate the disparity in convictions for stand-your-ground laws as applied along lines of race. In response to the verdict many academics and non-academics loudly expressed on social media that this was a case of racial profiling.

Many Americans are tired of and frustrated with the myriad of news stories about young children dying from gun violence, particularly young Black males. Given the history of race relations in the United States, where being Black has never carried the same advantages as being white, racialized homicides are especially troubling. The economic, political, and psychological costs of past cases have left the nation with a debt it certainly cannot afford to pay. Examples of racial injustice in the United States are numerous. In the early 1930s, the nine Scottsboro defendants were wrongly convicted of raping two white women. Over a decade of potential opportunities and experiences were lost while the Scottsboro nine sat incarcerated in one of the nation's most notorious penal institutions, Kilby Prison. Scores of cold cases from the 1950s and 1960s involving the homicides of Black men remain under investigation by the United States Department of Justice. In far too many instances of unsolved cases, local law enforcement officials were involved with the killings, and Black landowners and civil rights activists were permanently silenced because of fear of persecution.

During the period between 1960 and 1980, riots often stemming from unequal treatment received by Black people in the criminal justice system erupted as a result of intergroup conflicts, costing millions of dollars to local, state, and federal budgets. The riots that followed the 1986 beating death of Michael Griffith in Howard Beach, Queens, New York, is one example. Griffith, a Black male, was chased out of the predominately white middle-class community and struck by a car as he fled. Another example is the costly trial and false conviction of the Central Park Five, all young Black and Hispanic males. In its haste to convict someone for the brutal attack on a white female jogger, the City of New York allowed the Central Park Five to spend between six and thirteen years in prison for a crime they did not commit – five more lost lives. The 1990s were witness to the Crown Heights Riots in Brooklyn, New York, the brutal assault on Haitian immigrant Abner Louima, and the killing of unarmed African immigrant Amado Diallo. Both Louima and Diallo were harmed at the hands of members of the New York Police Department (NYPD).

There has been much of the same maltreatment of people of color in the justice system in the new millennium. The acquittal of NYPD officers involved in the shooting death of Sean Bell in 2006, on the eve of his wedding day, compelled many to take to the streets and demand justice for all. Similarly the conviction of

involuntary manslaughter, not murder, along with the reduced two year sentence of the police shooting of Oscar Grant III, a man killed by Bay Area Regional Transit Officers on January 1, 2009, drew significant outrage, and also reminded us that it is dangerous to be Black and male in the United States in the 21st century. Zimmerman's killing of Martin drew a similar type of outrage, perhaps even more outrage than the previously mentioned cases. Prior to Martin's death, many Americans were lulled into a false sense of security that racial injustice was in our distant past.

American racial and social justice is now at a proverbial fork in the road. The nation can continue on the *wrong* racial path where private actions and public policies continue to show that the scales of justice are not balanced, and that justice is not blind. Alternatively, America can choose the *right* path and create a more equitable society where the long arm of the law reaches individuals not because of their race, gender, class position, or geographical location, but because of a universal commitment to protect and to serve *everyone*. To create a more equitable society we must first take a serious account of race, which involves recognition of the multilevel and multidimensional nature of race in our lives, not excluding our institutions.

It is with this context that this volume is born. The editors in this text represent four different institutional contexts and positions. We differ across race (three Black and one white), institutional contexts (two southern and two Midwest), positions (two assistant professors, one associate professor, and one vice president), and disciplines (education, educational leadership, sociology, and counseling respectively), but all share a common commitment to racial equity and social justice. In the wake of the verdict in the Zimmerman case we each had strong reactions and responses, as did our friends and colleagues. From those reactions and responses we initiated a conversation with Series Editor, Patricia Leavy, about the necessity of an academic volume that could explore, in earnest, not only the particulars of Martin's death at Zimmerman's hand, but larger issues of race and inequity that the murder and the subsequent trial and acquittal reveal.

With the support of Leavy and Sense Publishers we conceptualized the space of this volume as a mechanism to 'write' the 'wrong' of Martin's murder. That is, the concept of this volume was to provide, through writing, both thinking and feeling spaces to explore the various inequities and racial problematics the incident and its subsequent case reveal. This edited volume brings together a cross-section of scholars to react, respond, and analyze the state of race in light of this tragic case. Through their writing, the authors help us all to better understand how to address racial wrongs that this case, and those of many other racialized experiences, reveals.

Since the election of President Obama, many believe that we have achieved a 'post-racial' moment. We argue that if post-racial was our reality, the verdict would have looked different. Removing race from Zimmerman and Martin, if such a thing were possible, one is left with the following objective facts:

- a) Zimmerman stalked and pursued Martin.
- b) Zimmerman did this despite police warning not to pursue.

- c) Zimmerman communicated, still alive, communicated a sole account of the incident to Martin to police, providing no corroborating evidence.
- d) Zimmerman provoked, if not initiated, a physical altercation with Martin.
- e) Zimmerman shot and killed Martin.
- f) Martin was unarmed.
- g) Martin was pursued and followed by a larger stranger.
- h) Martin was on the telephone with a friend when approached by Zimmerman.
- i) Martin, dead, was never able to provide an account of the events that lead to his death.

Post-racial analysis with these sets of facts would suggest that only a verdict of guilty could be reached; we know, however, that the verdict in this case revealed a different logic. This volume clarifies that not only are we not post-racial, but that race and racism are in many ways as prevalent in the 21st century as in many other times in our history.

Our contributors write about the racial wrongs and the lived experiences of people of color in the period following the tragic killing of young Martin. The is divided into five sections section focuses on a different aspect The first section brings together chapters which explore a different emphasis to provide a full range of ideas not just about the murder, but also about what this incident and case help us understand about the state of race in the United States. This volume is unique in that it is not simply a collection of academic chapters, but the work also includes unique and creative writing as well. Each section has contributions from creative writers who also write back to the racist society in which we live. The youths' contributions to this volume are not only unique, but poignant as these young men and women ask pressing and difficult questions of their society, ultimately providing us all with a more nuanced understanding of race.

Our hope is that this volume provides readers with the same sense of empowerment and liberation it provided us as editors and contributors. This historic volume provided each of us with an opportunity to reflect upon a national tragedy and allowed us to reveal that truths in the 'post-racial' are too often left unsaid. The writing has also allowed us to consider the institutional policies and personal practices that perpetuate the myth of group superiority and inferiority based upon race. It is our hope that our efforts to write these wrongs will lead to personal and institutional transformations that turn our upside-down country, where the killing of its children goes unpunished, right side up.

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SECTION 1

TRAYVON MARTIN: LIFE, DEATH, AND RACE IN AMERICA

BRYAN ELLIS

VICIOUSNESS

My mere existence reminds me of viciousness:
My being in America reminds me of theft;
My skin tone reminds me of rape;
My normal anxiety reminds me of past and future dreams deferred;
My everyday reality is vicious.

DAVID STOVALL

2. KILLING YOU IS JUSTICE

Trayvon Martin as Metaphor for the Continual Disposability of Black Life in the Eyes of the Law

*“You ain’t shit... That’s the lesson I took from this case.” Ahmir “?uestlove”
Thompson*

The following chapter should not be read as any ‘new’ discoveries on Black life. Nor should it be read as a treatise on the construction of any groundbreaking theoretical construct that will allow us to reconfigure how to best investigate the plight of young people in the U.S. For this contribution, the actual events of February 26, 2012, the actual day on which Trayvon Martin was shot, and July 14, 2013, the date of George Zimmerman’s acquittal, are not in question. In their place, I am suggesting that we understand both instances as part and parcel of an ideological and literal understanding of the positioning of Black youth as disposable in the eyes of the law and mainstream (read, white, conservative, affluent/middle-class) society. For these reasons, the following document should be understood as a perpetual reminder of the ways in which Black life is constructed and devalued.

By engaging this reality through personal narrative, I hope to challenge our daily thinking about life in the US for Black youth. Coupled with the understandings of Latino/a, First Nation, South and Southeast Asian, and LGBTQAI young people, many still exist in a world that has considered them unworthy of recognition. The purpose here, however, is not to paint the current moment as a dystopia of unparalleled proportions. Opposing the assumption of the disposability of the aforementioned youth, I operate with the understanding that ‘the more you know about your reality and your surroundings, the more you are able to do to change the conditions.’ In the process, however, is often a cold, jarring reality that is often perplexing. The shock of the moment makes the pathway towards healing considerably difficult. Nevertheless, there should be a commitment to engage in what Ginwright (2010) referred to as a “radical healing” that includes recognition of the conditions in which we work coupled with a commitment to work with others to change them.

My process of healing rests in understanding the murder of Martin and the subsequent farce of his court case as reflective of a politics of disposability. In the tradition of critical race counterstorytelling, where the lives of people of color are contrasted against mainstream assumptions on our lives, I see the life of Martin

as easily being my own (Yosso, 2006). Through counterstory, my attempt to make sense of the shooting and trial is encapsulated in my life as a life-long Chicagoan. Using the current nexus of school closings, the police/carceral state, neoliberalism, and gentrification, I attempt to understand the parallels of Martin's murder with the current moment in the city in which I reside.

Unfortunately the murder of Martin is one in the continuum of wrongful deaths of Black male youth based on an assumption of criminality or wrongdoing. For these reasons I do not think of Martin in the singular. Instead, his death alerts us to the fact that there are many *Martins* throughout the U.S. The metaphor and reality of their lives are in accord with the lives of young people of color in Chicago. Overall, the looming premise remains:

It does not matter if you have a criminal record or not. It doesn't matter that you're fourteen and are in an apartment complex where your father resides. It doesn't matter that despite an order to cease and desist to your killer from an actual police officer, you were still pursued and subsequently killed in a struggle to protect yourself. You're young, Black and most likely a criminal anyway. We don't need you. You should be someplace else. Why aren't you in jail? The mere presence of your existence disturbs what the good, nice folks of this town are trying to present as a thriving community free of crime or ilk. We don't need you or your type around here. For all intents and purposes, you ain't shit. (D. Stovall, personal communication, n.d.)

This resonates the deepest with me when thinking about the recent closures of forty-seven schools in Chicago, the largest single set of school closings in a calendar year in the history of the United States. Where many national media outlets have portrayed Chicago as a crime-ridden metropolis riddled with gang tensions, my own perceptions as a resident and researcher present me with another framing of the current conditions. In thinking about conflict via gun violence, my reframing of the situation resonates more with the idea of an engineered conflict. With poor people of color as the targets, I am not entertaining theories of conspiracy or clandestine operations. Instead, a look beneath public policies in the city reveals a condition that is more nefarious than we care to admit. Regarding Martin's murder, the decision made in the Sanford courthouse should be considered on the same continuum that fuels gentrification and the closing of public schools in Chicago. For these reasons, the following narrative of my own neighborhood is reflective of my understandings of the Martin verdict and the ideology that fueled it.

WALKING IN WOODLAWN:
UNDERSTANDING A CONTEXT OF CONFLICT AND DISPOSABILITY

Woodlawn, my neighborhood, exists largely as an extension of a police state in one of the most segregated cities in the world. From my front door at any given

time there is a squad car parked at either end of my block. If, for any reason, they are not parked directly on my block, they are either in some configuration on the streets adjacent to my block, or scattered throughout the neighborhood no less than two blocks away from each other. This process is part of a larger policing strategy that has identified “hotspots” for criminal activity. Woodlawn has experienced almost 20 years of disinvestment and uneven development. In the early 1990s, a significant proportion of the housing stock was abandoned and discarded. This becomes important to the context as the University of Chicago is divided between the communities of Woodlawn and Hyde Park. Wishing to expand the campus and to make the university more attractive to donors and prospective students, the University has engaged in an expansion effort in Woodlawn. Because the University owned significant amounts of the vacant or cleared property through a land trust, the idea was to ‘develop’ the property and expand the University campus to the south. To ‘protect’ the university students from the potential ‘criminal’ element of Woodlawn, the University of Chicago Police in collaboration with the Chicago Police Department have engaged in a joint strategy to contain crime to specific spaces in Woodlawn.

Complicating the situation even further are competing residential interests in the neighborhood, where a segment of the new residents are also concerned with the perceived criminal element of the community. Where some are University of Chicago faculty and staff, others are professionals who have recently purchased homes in the neighborhood. Simultaneously, many long-term residents feel as if they have been infringed upon as one of the only mental health clinics on the Southside of the city closed due to city budget cuts. Additionally, a multimillion-dollar University of Chicago hospital in the northern section of the neighborhood has been built without a trauma center. This is of particular significance as there is only one trauma center for the Southside of the city that is primarily African American and Latino/a.

Often positioned as a battle between renters and homeowners, this binary is inaccurate to describe existing neighborhood tensions. Instead, similar to the Martin murder and subsequent trial, it is a complex set of relationships mired in the nexus of race, class, and gender. New residents, encapsulating a mix of African American professionals and white University of Chicago faculty, are pushing the redevelopment aspect, with property rehabilitation and land development in the center. Long-term residents seek a form of neighborhood revitalization to keep their homes, while engaging in a sustainable project of development not subjugating families that might have fewer resources and lower household incomes. With significance to the Martin decision, the conditions in my neighborhood serve as perpetual reminders of how the city has created a situation to continually remind certain residents of their disposability. For the new residents, the police state is often interpreted as a sign of protection. For families that have historical roots in the community, it is an intensified version of ‘more of the same.’

SCHOOL CLOSINGS, DISPOSABILITY, AND THE CONTRADICTIONS OF
'SAFE PASSAGE'

In addition to the explicit police presence in my community, two of the forty-seven closed schools are less than two blocks away from my front door. In a neighborhood such as mine with all of the aforementioned tensions, school closings are particularly significant in reference to their relationship to uneven development/gentrification. Since the proximity of a school is the primary determinant of a family purchasing a home in the area, Woodlawn presents a particular conundrum. The majority of students attending Woodlawn schools are the children of long-term residents from families categorized as working-class/low-income. The issue, however, has become depopulation. Because of the lack of affordable housing stock, some schools have seen drastic reductions in their populations. Under austerity measures, central office (Chicago Public Schools—CPS) creates a rationale for reducing costs and makes a decision to close schools in areas that are not only depopulated, but have been historically underserved. Despite the lack of revealing their equation for school closings, the vast majority of the schools have been closed in communities that have been disinvested.

In preparation for the new gentry of residents, CPS has attempted to pacify parents through a strategy known as 'safe passage.' Created by former Marine colonel Tom Tyrell, whose primary specialization was hostage negotiation in the Kosovo conflict, CPS has teamed with the Chicago Police Department to create a series of pathways between schools and surrounding communities. Currently, hourly employees patrol the routes by one hour before school begins and one hour after dismissal, and their primary responsible is watching over students. Coupled with the hourly employees are police cruisers that are positioned along the pathways. On the first day of school in Woodlawn, there were mounted patrols and fire trucks along with the police cruisers and hourly employees patrolling the "safe passages."

Utilizing an alternative perspective, very little of this description should be considered "safe" for the young people walking along these pathways. Instead, a re-framing of the issue would consider safe passages as an extension of the police state through constant surveillance. Instead of feeling safe, like their parents, students from working-class/low-income families are reminded of the fact that there is an active plan to remove them. If there is ever a moment of perceived upheaval, the young people along those "safe" passages will be instantly reminded that they are no longer safe, but targets of the city.

MOVING FORWARD

This is a very difficult chapter to conclude. I must confess that living under these conditions can evoke the myriad of emotions and reactions. If I remain steadfast in my commitment to the project of radical healing through the process of changing my conditions, I know the process must be a collective one. If we are actively seeking to

end this set of policies and implementations, we must begin with the how we have arrived at this point. We must take the bold steps of informing our communities and organizing with them in the pursuit of justice. Our roads are often hard, but we must continue to believe and know that Martin and the hundreds of thousands like him did not die in vain.

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