

(Re)Teaching Trayvon: Education for Racial Justice and Human Freedom

Venus E. Evans-Winters and
Magaela C. Bethune (Eds.)



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**(Re)Teaching Trayvon: Education for Racial Justice
and Human Freedom**

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**(Re)Teaching Trayvon: Education for Racial Justice
and Human Freedom**

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VENUS E. EVANS-WINTERS

INTRODUCTION: (RE)TEACHING TRAYVON

Trayvon Martin was killed on Feb. 26th in Sanford, Fla., fully 60 years after Ellison published Invisible Man. The circumstances of the unarmed 17-year-old's death suggest that even six decades later, invisibility plagues black folks, still. It happened like this. He was visiting his father, watching hoops on television. At halftime, he left his dad's townhouse in a gated community and walked to a 7-Eleven for snacks. There was a light drizzle and he was wearing a hooded sweatshirt and jeans. On the way back, he drew the attention of George Zimmerman, captain of the Neighborhood Watch. Zimmerman, who is white, called police from his SUV and told them he was following a "suspicious" character. The dispatcher promised to send a prowl car and told Zimmerman to stay in his vehicle. He didn't. When police arrived, they found him with a bloody nose and Martin face down on the grass not far from his father's door; a gunshot wound in his chest. Zimmerman said he shot the boy in self-defense. Police did not arrest him. At this writing, nearly three weeks later, they still have not, citing insufficient evidence. The case has been referred to the State's Attorney and the NAACP has asked the Justice Department to intervene.

—Leonard Pitts Jr., Miami Herald

For over a year, laypersons and scholars alike watched as those in the media continued to publicly dissect Trayvon Martin, the Florida teen who was killed by a neighborhood watchman. His body, school life, choice of attire, friends, and family were all put on display for public consumption and gratification. While we watched in awe as the hydratic head of White supremacy sprung its ugly head once again, even in the death of a minor, our nation's youth watched close by as adults mutilated Trayvon's humanity before a live viewing audience. *(Re)Teaching Trayvon: Education for Social Justice and Human Freedom* looks at how society, including the media, constructs the Black male body.

From the boardroom to the courtroom, White and non-White adults (e.g. Black cultural critics, scholars, and attorneys included) desecrated not only Trayvon, but also millions of youth across the U.S. who live, walk, talk, and dress similar to the Florida teen. In the public scrutiny of Trayvon's life, very privileged and powerful people simultaneously sequestered the lives of other young people who could identify with Trayvon and urban youth culture, especially his Black male peers. In the words of African American novelist Richard Wright, "But the color of a

Negro's skin makes him easily recognizable, makes him suspect, converts him into a defenseless target". In this book, teachers, university professors, attorneys, cultural critics, parents, poets, and grassroots activists of various racial/ethnic backgrounds attempt to communicate to the world the humanity of the Black male child.

More politically and culturally conscience individuals understand that Trayvon's murder was reflective of a larger history of racial aggression and terror in the U.S. The hydratic head of white supremacy attempted to camouflage the injustice that Trayvon Martin and his family endured. In the 21st Century, the hydratic head of White supremacy is an intricate conglomerate between the white media corporate elite, the so-called "race-blind" criminal justice system, racialized policies, and racist and classist discourse in the educational system. The White- controlled media depicted Trayvon as a wayward thug who was out searching for trouble, as indicated by him walking in a majority White gated community, and hiding his Black face behind a hooded sweatshirt.

Similarly, the criminal (in)justice system painted him as a lawless drug user, in an attempt to characterize the teenager as anything other than an innocent child, despite his carrying a sweet drink and candy on his person. And, borrowing from media cues and deeply entrenched Eurocentric ideologies about people of African ancestry in the U.S. and abroad, Trayvon was sold as a fully grown man full of trickery, savagery, and Black masculine rage; enough rage to kill an adult male with his bare hands. In juxtaposition, George Zimmerman, his adult assailant and murderer, was characterized as a self-sacrificing hero; a protector of property and white women from aggressive criminally-inclined Black males.

In fact, Zimmerman was lauded in court, and in the media, for going above and beyond call of duty to prevent a second home invasion against a White woman who was home alone with a child against an alleged African American male intruder who got away. Therefore, Zimmerman had a right to *stand his ground* for supposedly the public good. For many, Florida's Stand Your Ground Law is reminiscent of antiquated lynch laws. With these laws, mobs of White men were allowed to play judge and jury. Consequently, any Black man (or woman and other non-Whites) deemed to be insubordinate, disobedient, or smugly toward a White man or woman could be hanged in southern jurisdictions by Whites with little or no legal consequences.

Of course, a Black person found on the wrong side of town-White neighborhoods-could also be lynched and/or legally prosecuted. As the case of slave laws (the enslaved needed written permission to travel away from their owner's property or hold a signed document that declared them a freed person) and lynch laws, it seems that Trayvon's murder was justified, because he was discovered in a White neighborhood without permission, and allegedly did not assent to the White sanctioned authority. Laws have always been used to support the ideologies and justify the fears of white supremacists, and the *Stand Your Ground Law* justified Zimmerman taking the life of a Black teen.

White supremacy tactics have always drawn on socially constructed notions of intelligence or academic aptitude to draw conclusions about the moral and behavioral propensities of people of African ancestry. Therefore, it is not surprising that media

and legal experts publicly examined and reported on Trayvon's schooling history. For example, claims were made that Trayvon was a bully and that he was suspended from school for fighting. The teen was also accused of truancy and tardiness, and his murderer's legal defense team reviewed his grades.

For most, it seems bizarre that that a murdered child's school records could justify that child's murder at the hands of an adult. However, for those of us familiar with the relationship between racism and notions of intelligence, the legal and medical profession, and eugenics, we are not that surprised. Eugenicists declared some people unfit to live. The mostly White jurors declared that Trayvon was unfit to live, based on his academic background and other qualities that did not align with White Eurocentric culture; thus, Zimmerman was acquitted.

In sum, with the growth of social media, information technology, and mass media, the hydratic head of White supremacy took on a new meaning following the Trayvon Martin murder coverage and the George Zimmerman trial. Although on the one hand we witnessed millions of Americans from diverse backgrounds come together to celebrate the innocence of Trayvon, on the other hand, we also incessantly watched his innocence dissipate publicly and his adult murderer declared innocent. As a result, every child in the U.S., White and non-White, became aware of their place in the racial social order.

(Re)Teaching Trayvon looks at the meaning given to Trayvon Martin's life and murder, as well as the eventual acquittal of George Zimmerman. The authors look at this recent, and somewhat on-going, tragedy from a critical perspective. On-going because Trayvon was not the first or last unarmed Black youth (males and females) to be killed at the hands of a White adult. One objective of the book is to bridge the gap between social theory and praxis. Another objective of the book is for authors and audiences to imagine what lessons can be taught to educators and students alike that might serve to prevent future similar tragedies. Readers will discover that the book includes a body of theoretical and empirical works that examine the historical, social, and cultural context surrounding the murder of Trayvon Martin. More specifically, the chapters address the following topics critically, yet, empathetically:

1. the role that race/racism and/or cultural domination played in shaping education, media, and legal discourse surrounding the teenager's murder as well as the eventual "not guilty" verdict of his adult assailant and murderer;
2. how the educational system, simultaneously neglects, surveillances, and objectifies the young Black body; or
3. explores how the white corporate patriarchal media elite, along with the middle class dominated educational and legal systems interact as interlocking systems of oppression that form a matrix of domination over the Black body.

Altogether, the authors sophisticatedly and poignantly expose a long history of a society that reads, interprets, and falsely accuses the Black body of malice. What does continual surveillance and persecution mean for countless young men and women? Even more importantly, what is the role of educators (preK-22) and social

V. E. EVANS-WINTERS

justice advocates in countering societal beliefs about youth of African descent? Furthermore, what is the role of parents, teachers, and community workers, in preparing our young for a possibly hostile environment?

The final chapters of the book directly address the pedagogical and educational implications of addressing issues that directly impact the lived realities of youth of African ancestry, urban adolescents, those of the hip-hop generation, and/or African American boys specifically. In *(Re)Teaching Trayvon*, the authors have an open and honest conversation about the need to re-educate the public on race and racism to save the lives of our young people and the moral conscious of this nation.

REFERENCE

Pitts, L. (2012). *Tragic teen shooting raises old fears, questions*. Retrieved from <http://www.miamiherald.com/2012/03/17/2698133/tragic-teen-shooting-raises-old.html>

PART I
PORTRAYALS AND BETRAYALS OF
THE BLACK MALE BODY

A. D. CARSON

THE UNDERSTANDING

Be afraid
of me.
Very afraid. I am
your worst nightmare.

When you
walk home late-night, or
rest, home, in
comfort, in
fear of some-
one some-
how
taking from you—

some
brute, some
menace, some
delinquent—

I am
the image envisioned.

For this,
many more reasons,
you should
be afraid.

This is
no threat;
mere fact...

I am
your
fear. I

A. D. CARSON

know. I
tell you
you
should.

I
welcome
your
fear.

I
welcome it
mainly because
nothing can
be done about it.
It
honestly works to
my benefit.

More than
my resemblance to the
mental image,
brutality,
held so dearly,
fear me
for what I am
actually:

Literal
worst nightmare—
Man next door, your
coworker, your
colleague, your
boss, your
brother-in-law...

maybe *you*.

Mangled manifestation of
American
Dream,
Living
liberated, pursuing

THE UNDERSTANDING

happiness, laughing—you
trembling...
my presence.

I
wish no harm. I
harbor no ill will. I,

unangry,
unashamed,
unapologetic,
unwilling to bow head,
smile or
shuffle along

will not give you
comfort
being here
collecting mine
by right. Remember,

I, too, am
America. You have
every reason
in the world to

be afraid.

ANTHONY L. BROWN & MARCUS W. JOHNSON

1. BLACKNESS ENCLOSED

*Understanding the Trayvon Martin Incident through the Long History of
Black Male Imagery*

INTRODUCTION

The death of Trayvon Martin helped to resurface thoughts from theorists and critics about the tentative status of African American males in the U. S. Many asked questions about whether Trayvon's death and the subsequent acquittal of George Zimmerman helped to set in place a new kind of racial contract (Mills, 1997), where racial violence is sanctioned and justified, as opposed to being extralegal—particularly for the young, urban Black male. Such concerns remained within the public discourse about Trayvon Martin regarding the nature of racial profiling and the hyper-visibility as well as vulnerability of Black males in schools and society. In many cases, discussions about the tragic interaction of George Zimmerman and Trayvon Martin spoke to a long history of “profiling,” where Black subjectivity is read, named and acted upon in the context of a civil democratic society.

The intent of this chapter is to explore some of the histories and discourses that have helped give ontological meaning to Black males. We argue in this chapter that there are several historical periods where Black males were discursively framed (Foucault, 1972) in relation to the material interests of labor and conceptual interests of racial marking (Holt, 1995). We argue that the context of racial violence for Black males are informed by a confluence of racial knowledge (Goldberg, 1993) that made possible and even normalized racial death — as in the case of Trayvon Martin. The thesis of this chapter is that *a priori* knowledge about Black males informed the Trayvon Martin incident. In other words, Trayvon Martin was a ready-made construct, developed by the enduring discourse of Black male deviance. This paper draws theoretical inspiration from the work of Keffrelyn Brown (2012), who argues that deeply entrenched historical discourses delimit how African American students are conceptualized in schools and society. Brown argues that an enduring “framing discourse” encloses Black students' educational experiences. In a similar sense, Tyrone Howard (2013) argued:

In many ways, DuBois's question (How does it feel to be a problem?) precisely speaks to the manner in which Black males at the turn of the 21st century may feel if they were to peruse much of the social science literature, popular press, mainstream media, and even within the academic discourse about their

academic performance and overall potential. A read through of a majority of the literature on Black males would reveal a number of disturbing classifications. In conducting research for this work, the terms that frequently came up with Black males were phrases such as *at-risk*, *endangered*, *remedial*, *in crisis*, *uneducable*, *extinct*, and *left behind*. (p. 57)

The first section of the paper will theorize the historical foundations of racial Other-ing. We argue that the historical construct of the deviant Black male can be defined through a dominant trope of Black male deviance traced back to the 15th century. We further argue that the contingencies of time and space and the use of multiple devices (e.g. science and theology) helped to produce a new *subjective understanding* (Wynter, 2006) about Black males that informed the context of racial violence.

Modernity and the Human Other

The social imagination of the Black male took form by the zeitgeist of European Modernity. In the post-Enlightenment Era, the philosophical ideals of reason made possible a world defined by giving order and classification to every aspect of the human world, including who would be considered *human*. The very idea of *Man* has been argued by numerous scholars to be an invention of Modernity (Wynter, 2006). The conditions of the theology and science would help to set in place categories of personhood. Sylvia Wynter (2006), for example, maintains that the theology of medieval Latin Christian Europe sought to define those that had rejected the Gospel into categories of otherness that helped in producing classifiable terms such as inter alia, heretics, pagan, idolaters, or Enemies of Christ (p. 124).

What surfaced from these early conceptions of defining the non-Christians was a more insidious notion of what Wynter calls the *Human Other*. Wynter further explains that as the monarchical European state system began to take form, notions of who could be considered a “citizen” were tied to overarching conceptions of humanness. This set forth a new classificatory system of humanness concerned with one’s capacity to be a rational subject or citizen—what Wynter calls *Homo Politicus*. The *subjective understanding* of European Christian doctrine and the ideology of what constitutes a citizen would become the defining markers of Black life. The *Negro* was constructed as the antithesis to the logical and rational citizen of the post-Enlightenment Europe. The definition of the African male would remain measured by Western classificatory systems of citizenship and theology (Jordan, 1968). In the context of Eurocentric constructs, all categories of good and righteous were qualitatively and quantitatively measured through the constructs of whiteness and blackness.

In addition to the dominant discourse of Judeo-Christian exegesis and European political theory, the notion of *whiteness* helped to produce a duality between Black

and White men, which endured through most of the twentieth century. The hegemonic racial rules of White statehood and Christianity helped to ontologically enclose men of African descent in the category of the *The Racial Other*. This construction of the racial Other was not a single declaration of an enduring racial contract, but in subsequent centuries new technologies and apparatuses were employed to give new ontological meaning to Black maleness.

The racial knowledge of Black men would help to give meaning and credibility to constructs that would unsettle its grounding through various revisionist ontological projects (Mills, 1998). Thus, the production and reproduction of new racial knowledge would become vital to hold in place an enduring racial hierarchy. The most insidious and implicit way to secure the metanarrative of Black male deviance was to normalize his humanness as questionable and theologically enclosed by God's will. The process of naming and classification was a powerful means to produce what David Theo Goldberg (1993) calls *racial knowledge*. He maintains that racial knowledge is an exercise of power that seeks to normalize social reality. Goldberg (1993) states,

Power is exercised epistemologically in the dual practices of naming and evaluating. In naming or refusing to name things in the order of thought, existence is recognized or refused, significance assigned or ignored, being evaluated or rendered invisible. Once defined, order has been maintained, serviced, extended, operationalized. (p. 150)

The continuance of categories and images of Black males in a Western and North American context helped to sustain an established imagery of Negro as beast, while providing new and contextually defined discourse. The consequences of this normalized metanarrative have been devastating. From the 1600s to the present, old and new discourses helped to hold in place an unquestioned idea that Black men are dangerous and irresponsible. Thus, in the Fanonian sense (Fanon, 1968), the very sight of the Black male body in social spaces helped to provoke ideas that helped to cultivate an enduring racial knowledge about Black males. As philosopher George Yancy (2008) poignantly describes,

The Black body is constructed as antithetical within a binary logic that points to the white body's own "signifying [and material] forces to call attention to itself" as normative. Indeed, whiteness is deemed the transcendental norm, the good, the innocent and the pure, while Blackness is the diametrical opposite. This is the twisted fate of the Black body vis-à-vis white forms of disciplinary control, processes of white racist embodied habituation, and epistemic white world making. (xvi)

In the subsequent section we outline how the "epistemic white world making" during slavery and after Reconstruction discursively made Black men into Sambos, beasts and criminals.

ENSLAVED AFRICANS: CURSED, DANGEROUS AND FEEBLE MINDED

God, Race and Black Men

During the 1600s when Africans came to the shores of Jamestown, the idea of the Black males as being a “natural slave” (St. Aubin, 2002) existed before the development of U. S. chattel slavery. As Jordan (1968) explains, the first encounters between English travelers and African men entailed observations of the so-called bestial nature of Black men. Black men were conceptualized in journals, letters, and sermons as libidinous and not capable to function within a civil society. As numerous historians and scholars (Duru, 2004; Jordan, 1968; Lyons, 1975) explain, even before chattel slavery took form in the U. S. the idea of the Black male was already conceptualized as a “natural slave”. As Duru (2004) powerfully explains,

Having been tagged as sexually potent animalistic criminals, blacks were subjected to chattel slavery in the new world. They did not, however, have the fortune of shedding the stereotypes upon introduction into slavery. On the contrary, the institution of slavery further entrenched the stereotypes. Indeed, the very existence of blacks as slaves reinforced the perception of their bestiality” “the slave is outside of the culture and therefore is nonhuman; is deprived of the freedom and therefore is a beast”. (p. 4)

It was clear that Black men were constructed as the antithesis to White male “civility”. As scholars explain (Mills, 1997; Yancy, 2008), whiteness could not exist without the category of blackness. Given that modernist notions of mankind were enclosed by masculinist discourse, *man* was manifestly a *White male*. Therefore, the Black male slave became constructed by multiple discourses to give legitimacy to the idea that Black males were ontologically fit for bondage. The discourse of science and theology would have the most significant impact on how the ideas of Black men as “natural slaves” would endure.

One of the more powerful methods of defining and constructing Black men as predetermined for bondage and enslavement was to locate and justify their placement in society as defined and located within a divine realm. It is one thing to develop laws and ideologies that enclose the experiences of enslaved Africans, but it is another thing all together to argue that the racial hierarchy between White men and Black men are set in place by God’s will. This places the context of enslavement not in the hands of men that may have corrupt means to enslave one of God’s children, but in the very hands of God.

The first step in shaping this racialized theological imagination was to suggest that Adam and Eve were White thus arguing that whiteness and White people were the “chosen people” of God. Then the relationship between master and slave required biblical reference. The book of genesis and the story of Noah, Ham and Canaan, or what was called the *Curse of Ham*, would be the metanarrative to sustain the idea that of the White man as master and the Black man as slave. The crime

of Ham seeing his father's nakedness was eternal slavery. The catch, however, for supporters of slavery was that the descendants of Ham were Kushites and of African descent, thus arguing that people of African descent were accursed to the condition of enslavement. In the words of David Brion Davis (2006),

Given this emerging precondition, ingenious reinterpretations of “the Curse” provided divine sanction and justification to an emerging or existing social order for well over a thousand years. Thus as we shall find, it was not originally racist biblical script that led to the enslavement of “Ham’s black descendants,” but rather the increasing enslavement of blacks that transformed biblical interpretation. (pp. 66–67)

The circulation of this story through sermons and speeches offered detailed descriptions of the moral debasement and libidinous nature of the African male. Discourses of this kind led to the conclusion that the patriarchal institution of slavery must control and maintain the lustful and bestial ways of the Negro and male in particular. The intention of those who invoked this story into the American context was to create the conditions for slavery to be a form of benevolence or as way for White Americans to employ harsh conditions for the enslaved African and for the African to render obedience to their social death (Patterson, 1982) and condition of bondage.

Christianity and biblical reference was powerful in its ability to normalize the character and imagery of Black men as naturally lustful and savage. These natural behaviors and capacities were made and remade into a story not only imprisoning the public imagination but the Negro male body as well. The condition of *man* and sin was now enclosed within the character of the racial other—the Negro male—bred to work the land and in need of enslavement to maintain his natural desires and capacities. However, as we argued throughout this essay, a social construction cannot rely on one device alone. As the new episteme of science took hold, so did the grammar and vocabulary for constructing Black male deviance.

Scientific Discourse and the African Male

The efforts of scientists were to study and dissect every aspect of the Negro male body to provide further definition to a social doctrine of Black male deviance. Some of the more empirical efforts surfaced in the 1800s when anti-slavery politics grew. The Black male body, including the skin, internal organs and brain, were assessed in relation to White males to give meaning to rational *man*, while simultaneously making Black males into a perpetual subperson (Mills, 1998) and a “natural slave”. As Drescher (1990) notes, Blacks were assumed to be part of a distinct group, typically characterized as a subspecies. While much of the science of this time focused on placing both Black men and women within the lower strata of humankind, scientists were particularly concerned with the anatomical distinctions between White men and Black men. The work of Dr. Charles White would have a lasting impact on the