

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

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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, linguisticism, 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

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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,

FOREWORD

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