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Trayvon Martin: The Unsettling Symbol, the Irreplaceable Son
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Pursuing Trayvon Martin: Historical Contexts and Contemporary Manifestations of Racial Dynamics. Edited by George Yancy and Janine Jones. Lexington Books, Lanham, MD. 2012. ISBN: 978-0-7391-7882-9. 302 pp. Hardcover, \$75.

Pursuing Trayvon Martin is an interdisciplinary anthology that is theoretically rigorous. A wide range of critical scholars is represented in this volume, including “scholars in the areas of anthropology, law, history, criminology and criminal justice, gender and women’s studies, Africana studies, political science, religious studies, psychology, and philosophy” (p. 18). The twenty essays these critical scholars have written seek to historically ground and make meaning of the killing of Trayvon Martin on February 26, 2012, a young black teenager who was armed only with skittles and iced tea. Though this anthology was published mere months after Martin’s death, an impressively fast turnaround time for academic work of this caliber, the essays are deeply insightful and tightly argued. The only thing that betrays the sheer speed with which this volume was constructed is the sense of immediacy in each of the essays. One gets the sense that understanding the event is incredibly urgent, that the lives of young black men hang in the balance. This is a book that could not wait. While it makes a seminal contribution to the field of critical philosophies of race, this book is much more than that. It models strategies for combating white supremacist discourse. As such, it is profoundly *unsettling*.

In much of the media coverage of the Martin killing, we see a key tactic of white supremacy. There is a concerted effort to decontextualize and dehistoricize the deadly encounter between George Zimmerman and Trayvon Martin, effectively covering over the involvement of racialized perception. In their essay, “Now You See It, Now You Don’t: Magic Tricks of White Supremacy in the United States,” Jaqueline Anderson, Sarah Lucia Hoagland and Anne Leighton unveil the “conjuring tricks” whereby racism is disappeared and ignored. In a sly sleight of hand, centuries of racism surrounding the killing have been made to vanish and are replaced with the “real” problem: guns, Martin’s hoodie or the “fact” of his threatening appearance, to name a few. These issues are nothing but distractions. Another move made by white supremacy to conceal the racism involved in the encounter between

Zimmerman and Martin is to “[f]rame the event as a discourse about individuals” (p. 29). Anderson, Hoagland and Leighton describe this as a strategy of “focused distraction” (p. 29). Decontextualize Zimmerman and Martin. Construct the event as an encounter between two individuals who are unrelated in any way by the history of race relations in the U.S. Then, in this “post-racial age,” we can see the killing as an “anomaly” that is “not relevant to the body politic” (p. 30). Remarkably, this collection of essays strategically counters these conjuring tactics by uncovering what white supremacy seeks to veil: the long, troubling history of anti-black racism in the U.S., which permeates the relational field between black and white bodies. This recontextualization is essential to the *unsettling* of white supremacy.

In his essay, “Dead Black Man, Just Walking,” William David Hart makes the startling claim that Martin’s death was a “post-mortem event” (p. 91). To be black and male in America is to be already dead. Hart draws a parallel between the condition of blacks during enslavement and the situation in which black Americans find themselves today. To be enslaved is to be socially dead, which means biologically alive, and yet permanently alienated and marked for death. While black Americans are not subject to the social death of enslavement, many are imprisoned and thus civilly dead, having lost the rights and privileges of citizenship. All black people, including Martin, are on “virtual probation.” This is the legacy of social death. To be the subject of virtual probation as a black male is to have a certain ontological status. It is to be “known” as a criminal, the way that Zimmerman “knew” that Martin was up to no good. Hart argues that Martin was the subject of the “criminogenic gaze,” a gaze that constructed him as a criminal. In his essay, “Trayvon Martin: When Effortless Grace is Sacrificed on the Altar of the Image,” George Yancy also points to the criminalization of black men as ontological. To exist as a black man is for your essence to precede your existence. He calls this “a species of death” (p. 238). Being black and male means that you are known in advance. It ensures that you cannot come *lithe* into the world. Instead, Yancy argues that “[t]o move too quickly in a world in which your essence precedes your existence—where you are, ontologically, the white racist image—is to confirm white fears: you *are* a threat” (p. 239). White epistemologies that reduce black men to dangerous threats are deadly. Not only are black men’s bodily meanings confiscated, which is a kind of existential death, but one may actually be killed. Since white supremacist discourse covers over the ways in which the field of sociality is saturated with historically sedimented meanings, white Americans act surprised when unarmed black men are senselessly killed. We ask, “How could this happen?” We swear that there must be more to the story than a packet of skittles, a can of iced tea and a white man with a gun—Martin must have looked dangerous, must have been acting strange, must have smelled like pot. Hart’s and Yancy’s analyses indicate that we should not be surprised by Martin’s death. Black men are already dead, their bodily meanings already foreclosed. In fact, the reader is invited to expect Trayvon Martin’s death, as many different contributors situate it within the lengthy history of often deadly violence perpetrated against stereotyped black people: Kenneth Chamberlain, Jasmine Thar, Ramarley Graham, Amadou Diallo, Sean Bell, Stephen Lawrence, Rodney King and Yusef Hawkins. These are just a few of the black people who have been, as Yancy’s title indicates, “sacrificed on the altar of the image.”

Several scholars in this volume point out that, when Trayvon Martin was “typed” as a dangerous black man by George Zimmerman, his particularity was effectively erased. For Yancy, to be reduced to a category is to “become identical to all black bodies, one-dimensional, and replaceable or disposable for that matter. He will not be missed” (p. 241). Even while white supremacy attempts to frame the encounter as an encounter between

decontextualized individuals, as Anderson, Hoagland and Leighton argue, a tragic byproduct of black men's reduction to the white racist image is a *loss of individuality*. George Zimmerman *knew* that Martin was a "thug," a threat. Martin is only a type, rather than a son, a brother, a friend and a lover of basketball. Tracey McCants Lewis indicates that this racialized and racist perception is especially painful for mothers of black sons. For whites not to see a black teenage boy as his mother sees him, as "the intelligent, loving, kind, funny, strong, and understanding child" that she *knows* him to be, constitutes a special kind of violence (pp. 157-8). Several contributors to this text unsettle this white supremacist erasure by pointing again and again to Trayvon Martin's *irreplaceability*. As Samantha Vice points out in "Politics, Moral Identity, and the Limits of White Silence," to be the subject of a text like this one is to become an "emblem," a symbol. Trayvon Martin has been "made to stand for something beyond himself" (p. 211). Martin's particularity was lost as soon as he was spotted by Zimmerman on February 26, 2012 and it might have been lost had this text treated his death as nothing more than a political event, as a symbol of the U.S.'s failure to be "post-racial." But Trayvon's particularity is a theme that permeates this text. Far from being forgotten or covered over, his irreplaceability is highlighted. Lewis R. Gordon calls Martin the "irreplaceable son" of Sabrina Fulton and Tracy Martin (p. 85). He *will* be missed. He is a child with parents who love him deeply and mourn the loss of a young black man who is not interchangeable. The invitation to see Martin as a particular human being, valuable in virtue of his humanity, functions as a powerful counter to white supremacist ideology, which seeks to type him as nothing more than a "dangerous thug."

At issue in George Zimmerman's trial is Florida's "stand your ground" law. Many contributors to this book address this law, historically contextualizing it as well as pointing out the inconsistencies in its application. Data shows that people are more likely to be successful in claiming self-defense under this law if the victim is black (p. 119). Devonya N. Harris does a fascinating Foucauldian analysis of the "stand your ground" law, arguing that it is inherently racialized. Racism is a basic mechanism of the exercise of state power, which determines who to let live and who to let die. In fact, "the survival of the dominant racial group is linked to the death of other races" (p. 123). "Stand your ground" laws justify the use of lethal force when one "reasonably believes" her life is in danger. Since whiteness is seen as clean and hygienic and blackness is seen as degenerate, it becomes "reasonable" to feel threatened by blackness. "Stand your ground" laws are thus become "an anchorage point for state-sponsored racisms" (p. 125).

Another way in which this collection of essays unveils and unsettles racism is through imaginative exercises in which readers are invited to imagine that Zimmerman and Martin's races, and the races of participants in similar encounters, are reversed. Vanessa Wills, in "What Are You Doing Around Here? Trayvon Martin and the Logic of Black Guilt," invites her readers to imagine a big black man with a loaded gun pursuing an unarmed white teenage boy dressed in a hoodie. After he shoots and kills the teenager in what he reports is self-defense, the police release him after conducting a " cursory investigation." Wills reports that her "classroom rippled with nervous laughter" when she asked them to consider this reversal (p. 230). Indeed, any honest person is compelled to admit that this scenario is ridiculous. Working from Descartes' philosophical view of conceiving, Janine Jones explains that such a reversal is incoherent or inconceivable. It is incoherent because "the things said or implied about Black *and* White people together, in relation to each other, are inconsistent with their whatness as articulated by the value projected onto them by a White, anti-Black, supremacist nation" (p. 150). The truth is, in white supremacist America, whites are treated as

nondisposable, valuable persons. Blacks are not. What happened to Trayvon Martin could never happen to a white boy.

My sense is that this book will be profoundly unsettling to white readers, as analyses of racist structures often are. To be white is to have the privilege of being settled, “to sit or rest in a comfortable position” (“Settled,” 2010). We belong. We are valuable. We move through the world with an easy grace (assuming we are normatively gendered). To read this book as a white person means being urgently called upon to interrogate one’s own complicity in racist systems of privilege that set the stage for Martin’s death. The unveiling of insidious structures of white supremacy should make white people uneasy. According to contributor Samantha Vice, as white people reflect on Martin’s death, “there is no morally comfortable position... to rest in” (p. 206). In a world where we (I speak from the vantage point of *my* own whiteness) are used to being comfortable and at home, there is value in being made uncomfortable and displaced. For black readers, my hope is that these essays have the kind of effect that Carol E. Henderson suggests that this kind of critical analysis can have: “[E]xposing the moral and ethical corruption of a nation is more than social activism—it is ‘necessary bread’ for rescuing—healing—our bodies, our minds, our very souls” (p. 255).

References

Settled. Def. 4. (2010). In *Oxford dictionary of English* (2nd ed.) [Kindle Fire version]. Retrieved from Amazon.com

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