

“I am Trayvon Martin”: Visual Culture, Trauma, and the Incarceration Crisis

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On February 15 2013, George Zimmerman’s brother appeared on an episode of the television show “Real Time with Bill Maher“ to exonerate his brother. He did so on the basis that his brother, as a Latino, was not capable of racism because he and his family were not only descendants of slaves but were also victims of and sensitive to anti-Latino racism. In an age of “colorblindness” that seeks to put a history of anti-Black violence under constant erasure, we have to be very clear that the case of Trayvon Martin is not simply about racism. Instead we must view it in the context of a history of anti-Black violence in the US that is very long and continues to be incredibly pervasive. In order to fully understand the ways in which anti-Black violence has been and continues to be a fixed component of American life, even in an era of “colorblindness,” it is necessary to consider the ways in which visual culture helps to create an ideological environment that can transform an unarmed, baby-faced teenage boy into a criminal so dangerous that his mere presence justifies the use of deadly force.

Noting that the earliest films created by Thomas Edison Studios “included footage of the darkest recesses of the prison,” Gina Dent has argued, “the prison is wedded to our experience of visibility.”¹ In the US, Blackness is a marker of social, cultural, and political standing whose very truths are seemingly made self-evident through visibility. Situating the violence at the heart of the Trayvon Martin case alongside history of anti-Black violence necessitates a return to an earlier moment in US history in which the visual also played a defining role in creating collective notions of the relationship between African American youth, racism, violence and the justice system. Visual representations of the murder of Emmett Till played a key role in constructing notions of youth, justice and the truth in the early civil rights era and were also an important catalyst for action among African Americans.

Emmett Till was a fourteen-year old boy from Chicago who went to spend the summer with an uncle in Money, Mississippi, a small Delta town, in 1955. During that visit, the boy reportedly took a dare from his cousins to speak to a white female store clerk. He reportedly said “bye, baby” on his way out of the small country store. Adult male relatives of the woman came later in the week at night to the house where Till was staying and took him away to be beaten and tortured to death, his now disfigured body tied to a 70 pound cotton gin fan and tossed in a nearby river.² Emmett Till was not the first Black child to be brutalized in this manner in the state of Mississippi, a state with a long history of anti-Black violence, but his alone case helped launch the civil rights movement and recast African Americans as the victims rather than perpetrators of

violence. This is largely attributable to the actions of his mother, Mamie Till, and her keen sense of the power of visual culture to impact the cultural and political realities of the US.

In order to claim the body of her son, Mamie Till had to fly to Mississippi and meet with the local sheriff who would release the body to her mortician only on the condition that they sign a statement saying that they would not open the casket for the funeral. Till signed the statement and promptly returned to Chicago to speak against her son's violation and to plan his funeral. Mamie Till not only invited the press but also insisted on having an open casket funeral so that the world could witness the violence that had been done to her son. When the images appeared in the African American press they caused a sensation. They provided a searing and *seemingly irrefutable* visual testimony to the history of racialized violence in the US.

The images of Emmett Till, like later images of Trayvon Martin, were caught in "overlap of value and beauty and our need to protect and defend that as a source of innocence," according to New York Times columnist Charles Blow. Martin and Till's ability to be presented in images as "young, handsomeness and presumably innocent" had the effect, according to Blow, of "amplifying outrage" at the social question of anti-Black violence.³ The impact of Till was in his ability to provide visceral *visual* evidence of violation. In the words of Fred Moten, "Emmett Till's face is seen, was shown, shone" (198). Lynching was such a common practice in the US into the 1950s that the New York offices of the NAACP made it a practice to hang a banner that read "A Man was Lynched Today" whenever they would receive word of a lynching in the South.⁴ Emmett Till's death, however, coalesced a feeling that the already fragile and insecure Black youth should be protected from the random ugliness of racial violence.

Till's image, both alive and dead, especially as it appeared in a *Jet* magazine photo spread in 1955 created a vector for sympathetic identification for African Americans across a wide variety of regions, contexts and social classes. Boxer Muhammad Ali writes of the Till tragedy as a moment of coming to racial conscious as a young teen in his autobiography *The Greatest: My Own Story*.⁵ For Ali, Till's murder is a moment framed in narrative by competing images. The young Ali views images of Till's disfigured body as contestatory to another image that he encounters at the same time. These images catalyze him into decisive action. He writes:

Emmett Till and I were about the same age. A week after he was murdered in Sunflower County, Mississippi, I stood on the corner with a gang of boys, looking at pictures of him in the black newspapers and magazines. In one, he was laughing and happy. In the other, his head was swollen and bashed in, his eyes bulging out of their sockets and his moth twisted and broken. His mother had done a bold thing. She refused to let him be buried until hundreds of thousands marched past his open casket in Chicago and looked down at his mutilated body. I felt a deep kinship to him when he learned he was born the same year and day I was. My father talked about it at night and dramatized the crime.

I couldn't get Emmett out of my mind, until one evening I thought of a way to get back at white people for his death. That night I sneaked out of the house and walked to Ronnie King's [house] and told him my plan. It was late at night when we reached the old railroad station on Louisville's West Side. I remember a poster of a thin white man in stripped pants and a top hat who pointed at us above the words UNCLE SAM WANTS YOU. We stopped and hurled stones at it, and then broke into the shoeshine boy's shed and stole two iron shoe rests and took them to the railroad track. We planted them deep on the tracks and waited. When a big blue diesel engine came around the bend, it hit the shoe rests and pushed them nearly thirty feet before one of the wheels locked and sprang from the track. I remember the loud sound of ties ripping up. I broke out running, Ronnie behind me, and then I looked back. I'll never forget the eyes of the man on the poster, staring at us: UNCLE SAM WANTS YOU. (34-35)

Emmett Till's murder was formative to a generation of young African Americans. For writers such as Anne Moody, who records the incident in *Coming of Age in Mississippi*, the murder of Till represented not only a burgeoning racial consciousness forged in collective trauma but also a significant loss of innocence and youth.⁶ The images of Emmett Till's murder were a spark to action for adults as well as youth. Rosa Parks would later write that it was of Emmett Till she was thinking when she performed her famous refusal to give up her seat to a white bus passenger, an action that sparked the Montgomery bus boycott. She writes: "I thought about Emmett Till, and I could not go back. My legs and feet were not hurting, that is a stereotype. I paid the same fare as others, and I felt violated. I was not going back."⁷

So how do we get from anti-Black violence as a loss of innocence as seen in the case of Emmett Till in 1955 to death of Trayvon Martin in 2012 in which the presumption of guilt lay not with the person who pulled the trigger but rather with the dead boy? What has happened to turn Black boys who are victimized by anti-Black violence from being seen as the victims of that violence to being seen as the perpetrators? The answer is simple: Black mass incarceration and the resulting criminalization of African American youth. Black representation has increasingly been reoriented around the realities of Black mass incarceration. While mass incarceration is increasingly becoming understood as "the New Jim Crow" for African American political organizing, Black criminality has become the key lens through which questions of masculinity, class exclusion, gender, and self-hood get negotiated in US visual culture.⁸ From the murder of Trayvon Martin to television shows like *The Wire* and *Oz* even to Tyler Perry's 2009 comedy *Madea Goes to Jail*, the public perception that criminality and African American cultural identity are inextricably bound together continues to be both a shaping and contested arena for visual culture.

Criminality has increasingly, since the seventies, becomes the major lens through which Black subjectivity is understood. As the prison population grew exponentially and became darker, criminality and incarceration became the most common matrix through

which cinematic notions of “the real” and Black authenticity have been constructed. The primary framework through which popular culture engages with the question of mass incarceration is visual violence. In her groundbreaking treatise on prison abolition *Are Prisons Obsolete?*, Angela Y. Davis has noted the intrinsic linkages between images of prison and “common sense” about the very necessity of prison itself. She writes:

It is virtually impossible to avoid consuming images of prison...The prison is one of the most important features of our image environment. This has caused us to take the existence of prisons for granted. The prison has become a key ingredient of our common sense. It is there, all around us. We do not question whether it should exist. It has become so much a part of our lives that it requires a great feat of the imagination to envision life beyond the prison. (18-19)

Davis’ work is suggestive of the symbiotic relationship between images of prison in the popular imaginary and the reality of prison as it is made manifest in public culture. With nearly 40% of the US federal prison population being African American, it is clear that prisons could not exist without the African Americans that fill them.⁹ But can African Americans exist without prisons that consistently construct them as subjects in visual culture?

In the case of Trayvon Martin, the ever-present threat of the Black male body as lawbreaker was made manifest in a baby-faced teenager. The body of the dead teenager was made to disappear under a discourse of “the hoodie,” which became a symbolic shorthand for Black male criminality. The iconography of “the hoodie” stood as both a replacement and containment of the threat of the black body as well as an enactment of its erasure at the site of its violation. This erasure of Black male victimhood was most tellingly illustrated in the creation of the gun target that was made available for commercial sale with the image of a hoodie sweatshirt skittles and a can of iced tea at its center.¹⁰ An imaging of the body of the dead teenager was made absent from the target thus making the idea of shooting at an unarmed teenager with candy in his hand palatable for a more general public. The move to cast Martin as a dangerous criminal was followed by a recasting of George Zimmerman as not only innocent of perpetuating any violence but also as the actual *victim* of Black violence. Furthermore, the idea that it was actually Zimmerman who had been violated rather than the dead teenager was often oddly cast in the language of anti-Black violence, including most prominently the repeated reference to his arrest and treatment in the media as a “lynching.”¹¹ The visual and narrative language of anti-Black violence that had been such a catalyst for the action of the civil rights movement was now made to work against African Americans themselves.

In response, Trayvon Martin’s supporters played to the visual and narrative language of violation and affiliation that had been the impetus for action in the Emmett Till case. “I am Trayvon Martin” became a rallying cry that united disparate supporters in a unifying language of shared violation. Even President Barack Obama offered a statement that captured in words the visual narrative of racial violation and affiliation: “If

I had a son, he would look like Trayvon Martin.”¹² In a counter-discursive move, supporters reasserted the visual primacy of the Black body removed by the discourse of “the hoodie” by posing in hooded sweatshirts across social media and in public protests. In replacing Trayvon Martin’s absent body with their own, supporters insisted on the primacy of the body of the dead teenager in the discussion of the case. These actions challenged the erasure of a history of anti-Black violence from the wider discourse of the case and asserted the primacy of African American violation rather than white victimhood.

Over seventy percent of prisoners in the federal prison system are Latino and African American though African Americans constitute only around 13% of the total US population and Latinos around 16%.¹³ In the state of Wisconsin, where African Americans constitute a mere 6% of the state population, they constitute over 50% of the state prison population. Created as a faith-based initiative by a multiracial coalition of churches, synagogues, mosques and other congregations called WISDOM, the “11 X 15” campaign seeks to address mass incarceration by a campaign demanding a 50% cut in the state prison population, to 11,000, by the year 2015. The “11 X 15” campaign decries mass incarceration as a strategy to make Wisconsin communities safe or healthy. Beyond noting that the racial makeup of the Wisconsin state prison system points to the manner in which “the system is deeply flawed and unfair,” the campaign notes: “There is a growing consensus that our current criminal justice system is an expensive failure. It is expensive in terms of money, lives and opportunities wasted. It is a failure because it does not achieve the goals of public safety or rehabilitation.”¹⁴

Campaigns like “11 X 15” are visionary in beginning to address the ways in which public policies of mass incarceration have been injurious to communities. However, the prison abolition movement would caution us to give careful consideration to the ways in which our construction of categories such as “criminal,” “crime” and “punishment” evolve from a matrix of historical investments deeply entwined with systems of racial and class inequity. Social justice campaigns such as the “11 X 15” campaign that seek to reduce the numbers of incarcerated people in the US would thus be wise to pay attention to the ways in which racial and income disparities are constitutive not only of those who break the law, of which the category is quite big, but rather those that are deemed “criminal” as a result. Angela Y. Davis writes:

Radical criminologists have long pointed out that the category “lawbreakers” is far greater than the category of individuals who are deemed criminals since, many point out, almost all of us have broken the law at one time or another. Even President Bill Clinton admitted that he had smoked marijuana at one time, insisting, though, that he did not inhale.... Thus, if we are willing to take seriously the consequences of a racist and class-biased justice system, we will reach the conclusion that enormous numbers of people are in prison simply because they are, for example, black, Chicano, Vietnamese, Native American or poor, regardless of their ethnic background. They are sent to prison, not so much because of the crimes they may have indeed committed, but largely

because these communities have been criminalized. Thus, programs for decriminalization will not only have to address specific activities that have been criminalized—such as drug use and sex work—but also criminalized populations and communities. (112-113)

Without close attention to the particular racial dynamics of mass incarceration and the specific criminalization of African Americans, the 50% of the state prison population that the “11 X 15” campaign would liberate could potentially be the 50% that is not African American.

Black mass incarceration has become a major shaping factor in African American life, guiding everything from public policy to “common sense” expectations of freedom, wealth accumulation, and life expectancy. The murder of Trayvon Martin demonstrates the ways in which public perceptions of crime and perpetual expectations of Black criminal wrongdoing shape the outcomes of even random and seemingly inconsequential encounters in the public sphere to tragic consequences. It suggests that crime is as much an invention in discourse as it is a chartable social phenomenon. The widespread designation of African Americans as pathologically criminal and constantly dangerous in visual culture sits in a symbiotic relationship to the stark realities of Black mass incarceration. If the case of Trayvon Martin teaches us anything it is that the visual transformation of African Americans into perpetual lawbreakers, a transformation that is created through image culture, actually costs lives.

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NOTES

¹ Thomas Edison was extremely influential in early cinema culture not only as an inventor of film technology but also as a film director and creator of the business practices of the film industry. Gina Dent specifically talks about “the reenactment presented as newsreel” in the 1901 Edison film *Execution of Czolgosz with Panorama of Auburn Prison*. As quoted by Angela Y. Davis in *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2003).

² There are many accounts of what happened the night of the murder of Emmett Till, including an account given of the murder by the acquitted murders in 1956 to *Look* magazine. I am relying on the account of the events written by Juan Williams (with the Eyes on the Prize Production Team) in *Eyes on the Prize: America’s Civil Rights Years 1954-1965 The Companion Volume to the PBS Series* (New York: Penguin Books, 2002).

³ Charles Blow “At Close Range: Keynote Address,” Center for the Study of Race and Race Relations, Levin School of Law at the University of Florida (<http://mediasite.video.ufl.edu/Mediasite/Play/0bb612b41ae84a359f258f135abb99321d>) accessed March 26, 2013.

⁴ Leigh Raiford gives an account of the history of that image in *Imprisoned in a Luminous Glare: Photography and the African American Freedom Struggle* (Durham: University of North Carolina Press, 2011).

⁵ Muhammad Ali (with Richard Durham) *The Greatest: My Own Story*. New York: Random House, 1975.

⁶ Anne Moody’s influential autobiography became one of the definitive accounts of the political formation of young people who became involved in the civil rights movement.

⁷ “Rosa Parks Quotes,” Thinkexist.com, www.thinkexist.com/quotes/rosa_parks/3.html (accessed March 23, 2013)

⁸ This idea has gained popular currency after the publication of Michelle Alexander’s *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2010).

⁹ The Federal Bureau of Prisons cites the Black prison population at 37.1%. <http://www.bop.gov/news/quick.jsp> (accessed March 13, 2013).

¹⁰ There are instances of this target circulating among law enforcement officers as in the following two articles. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/post-partisan/wp/2013/04/15/target-practice-with-trayvon-martin/> and <http://www.cnn.com/2013/04/13/us/florida-trayvon-martin-targets/index.html>

¹¹ The conservative and far right websites such as American Thinker, Chronicles, PJ Media, Occidental Dissent, Western Journalism, Before Its News and Stormfront among others all ran stories about the Trayvon Martin case with the title “The Lynching of George Zimmerman.” <http://www.cnn.com/2013/04/13/us/florida-trayvon-martin-targets/index.html>

¹² Memoli, Michael. “Obama: If I had Son, he would look like Trayvon Martin,” *Los Angeles Times*. March 23, 2012.

¹³ The Federal Bureau of Prisons breaks down the prison population by race under categories that include “White, Black, Native American, and Asian” and records Hispanics under the category heading of “ethnicity.” They cite the Black prison population at 37.1% and the Hispanic population at 34.9%. <http://www.bop.gov/news/quick.jsp> (accessed March 13, 2013).

¹⁴ “11 X 15 For Safer and Healthier Communities” at www.prayforjusticeinwi.org (accessed on March 13, 2013).