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Race, Media, and the Politics of Spectacle

Author(s): Safiya Umoja Noble

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Teaching Trayvon

Race, Media, and the
Politics of Spectacle

SAFIYA UMOJA NOBLE

Introduction

In March 2012, *The Atlantic* published an infographic that measured media coverage from the time of the shooting of Trayvon Martin, an African American teenager killed in Sanford, Florida, through the announcement by the Justice Department that it would seek a trial for his alleged killer, George Zimmerman. The picture represented national media coverage: forty-one media segments had been dedicated to Trayvon on CNN, thirteen on MSNBC, and only one on Fox News. Coverage of the case grew significantly through 2013, but for what purpose, and in whose interest was media coverage and social media traffic invested? In this paper, I argue that media spectacle was used to bring about news ratings, increased advertising, and social media traffic at the expense of a national conversation about racial justice, ending racial violence, and stopping gun proliferation. To do this, I take a critical view on ideology as a fundamental part of evaluating narratives in the media, and use critical discourse analysis as a way of making sense of the Trayvon Martin death in the media. This method of inquiry and analysis goes beyond descriptive content analysis, which often falls short of contextualizing the discourses of media in terms of power or domination among various social groups,

and instead situates Trayvon and George in a broader social and political context. Critical discourse analysis and critical race theory also allow for a deeper understanding of what it means for identity to be in a dialectical tension between the struggle for social justice organized around collective identities and histories, and the commercialization and ownership of such identities to sell products, services, and ideologies for profit. Protecting white property, including whiteness itself as property, has been much studied and well documented by critical race theorists. As such, critical race theory opens up a new way of thinking about how rights are a form of protected property, including Zimmerman's right to be afraid of blackness. It is within these frameworks that I will dis-

Safiya Umoja Noble is an assistant professor in the Department of Media and Cinema Studies and the Institute for Communications Research at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. She conducts research in sociocultural informatics, including feminist, historical, and political-economic perspectives on computing platforms and software in the public interest. Her research is at the intersection of transnational culture and technology in the design and use of applications on the Internet. Her most recent publications include "Google Search: Hyper-visibility as a Means of Rendering Black Women and Girls Invisible" in the journal *InVisible Culture*, and "Race and Social Media," coauthored with Theresa M. Senft in the *Routledge Handbook of Social Media*. Follow her on Twitter @safiyanoble or at safiyanoble.com.

cuss the death of Trayvon Martin as an organizing feature of an ensuing online social media and mass media spectacle that undermined attempts to recover a deeper inquiry into violent racialized death in the United States, while legally protecting the right to fear blackness.¹

Guy Debord offers relevant thinking to examine the spectacle of the Zimmerman trial in his 1967 book, *The Society of the Spectacle*. He articulates a framework for thinking about the nature of society, its culmination as a life of commodification, and the spectacle that society has become as a result of capitalism and alienation. For Debord, mass media was the ultimate or most profound manifestation or culmination of superficiality. Using this mode of analysis—the spectacle—in the context of Trayvon Martin and George Zimmerman means we consider their commodified status and how the mass media portrayed their stories.²

Certainly, many embraced artistic and creative representations of Trayvon and circulated these images through social media as a way of expressing a series of stances in support of him and his family. We shared stories and critiques of Trayvon and George in ways that opened up profound access to the details of their literal interaction the night of Trayvon's death, and its symbolic meaning. Much of this was done to sustain attention on persistent problems in U.S. race relations, two-tiered systems of justice, and the ways that racism is legitimated in courtrooms and in public opinion. It was these activities that made this case a national news story, separating it from the many murders of black men, boys, girls, and women that happen every day. Had we not done

these things, we can only speculate as to whether we would know the names Trayvon Martin and George Zimmerman, and in fact, whether I would be writing an article to discuss their impact in the public discourse on whiteness, blackness, power, and privilege. However, the “extrajudicial killings” of black people in the U.S. as documented by human rights activists fails to circulate as major media headlines.³

Texts of Black Male Criminality as Commodities in the Spectacle

Debord urges us to think about the ways in which the spectacle concentrates our gaze into a unified and often deceptive understanding or false consciousness that serves the interests of elites and capital. I argue the spectacle delivers to us a version of race and race relations, in many ways divorced from our own lived realities. Since the Zimmerman verdict of the summer of 2013, more African Americans like Trayvon have been found MWB (Murdered While Black). Renisha McBride, a nineteen-year-old Detroit teenager, was shot in the back of the head as she sought help from a white resident in Dearborn, an almost exclusively white community in Michigan. McBride was trying to find help in the neighborhood after being hit by a car. Her shooter's lawyer quickly invoked the Michigan “Stand Your Ground” law as a basis for taking her life. Just weeks prior, twenty-four-year-old Jonathan Ferrell, a former Florida A&M football player, was killed while seeking help after a car accident by police officer Randall Kerrick, who was subsequently charged with

voluntary manslaughter and is awaiting trial. While each of these news headlines has exploded in the spectacle of mass media, these deaths symbolize the myriad ways in which the spectacle swallows whole the story and spits back little to interrogate or dismantle systems of state-sanctioned or state-justified forms of violence on black life.⁴

Certain facts, like the creation of news segments dedicated to this story, can, and often do, support dominant power structures. Equally, there are attempts to subordinate the spectacle and to reframe and circulate counternarratives to unpack and make visible systems and practices of power and privilege. As a result of the media circulations, it is crucial that we look at the creation of Trayvon and George as commodities—stories for consumption, including the way in which their stories proliferated and were consumed for a variety of purposes. It is these stories that rule or shape our understanding of race, power, and privilege. The study of the texts and images and discursive ways they are used to represent people is important because it has direct impact on what we believe:

In sum, texts have causal effects upon, and contribute to changes in, people (beliefs, attitudes, etc.), actions, social relations, and the material world. It would make little sense to focus on language in new capitalism if we didn't think that texts have causal effects of this sort, and effects on social change.⁵

As Norman Fairclough asserts, texts can affect social reality and are a significant part of the shaping of social constructions of

identity. This is not to say that people don't have agency in reshaping and reconstituting identity through texts, institutions, organizations, political action, and other such engagements. They do, but that does not mean they are equal in power or that they proliferate with equal ease. Fairclough stresses the causal effects of texts on beliefs—as they “contribute to establishing, maintaining and changing social relations of power, domination and exploitation.”⁶

We could think of the ways in which many people around the world passively consume stories emblemized by Trayvon and George, and the spinning of facts or fabrication of ideas as working in the interests of dominant power structures that bolster everything from Stand Your Ground legislation to the commercial rap music industry–prison-industrial complex. In each of these interests, the criminality of black people is fundamental to the profit structures and power that are secured by proving over and over again that black life is expendable when it allegedly is where it doesn't belong, while white life must be featured as the noble antithesis. Black social death is enacted upon Trayvon as he is stripped of his identity in the spectacle and reframed as criminal when he is not, in fact, on trial. Trayvon's identity in the imaginary of the spectacle supports hegemonic narratives and totalizing power over black bodies. These media discourses exist beyond Trayvon and George, who literally and symbolically represent power inequalities. Their representations work at the micro-individual level to cement critiques about macro-structural inequality.⁷

The outcome of the Zimmerman trial is predicated upon narratives about which

the two were entitled to certain rights, but-tressed by a system that inherently privileges the rights of whites over blacks. Fact-finding sites like thinkprogress.org documented how George Zimmerman's acquittal was predicated upon his right to protect his property and, more symbolically, white American neighborhoods or "good neighborhoods" from "these thugs who always get away." These long-standing rights for property owners in the United States are inextricably tied to the lack of rights for black people to question the disproportionate accumulation and exercise of "more rights" for whites, including the right to kill based simply out of "the fear of blackness." These rights are also afforded to those who stand in acceptable proximity to white power structures and are able to access the privileges that whiteness affords, even if they are only half-white like George Zimmerman. Therefore, studying the historical social construction of blackness and its relevance in the case of Trayvon is, in part, guided by the social construction of whiteness that is made meaningful through such disparate experiences under the law and in the media. It was Trayvon's plausible criminality and Zimmerman's fear of it that led to acquittal.⁸

Evidence of larger structural critiques are often hidden in plain sight but marginalized as conspiratorial when argued against by African Americans who attempt to deconstruct systems of power derived from black criminality. Hip-hop journalists and historians openly state there is a relationship between private prison industry investments by the six major media conglomerates that control the national media and construct and circulate black male criminality narratives in

popular rap music culture. Such arguments suggest that the Vanguard Group Inc., the largest institutional investor in Viacom Inc., is heavily invested in the Corrections Corporation of America (CCA), the largest U.S. private prison corporation, with contracts in nearly every state. Their research shows that these financial investments are real. Viacom profits in direct relationship to dividends garnered from 90 percent occupancy rates mandated in CCA contracts, as well as from increases in CCA stock. As of September 2013, Vanguard was the largest investor in the GEO Group, which owns the most juvenile detention centers in the United States. Private prison and detention center investors include Scopia Capital Management, Eagle Asset Management, and Blackrock Fund Advisors, which also have entertainment and media industry holdings. What these intersecting financial and cultural investments point to is a material relationship between the construction of narratives that circulate to sell black masculinity as criminality in music, film, and television because it is not only directly profitable through the sales and consumption, it is also profitable when internalized, consumed, and acted upon in a way that results in imprisonment or detention. Selling criminality is big business.⁹

Selling customized stories to audiences is also the business of the spectacle. Let me illustrate with an example of a key news story that shed light on the production of news in the case of George and Trayvon. On April 20, 2012, a segment on National Public Radio (NPR) featured Steve Inskeep talking to Eric Deggans, a TV and media critic for the *Tampa Bay Times*, about how media outlets are emphasizing different aspects of the

Trayvon Martin story to grab the attention of particular audiences. Deggans discussed the audience measures and how media stories became different things for different news outlets depending on how they galvanized audiences. He suggested that MSNBC was focused on a more liberal message and that they are very proud of the fact that they are the most watched cable channel for African-Americans as demonstrated by their employment of the Reverend Al Sharpton. By contrast, he argued that Fox News was not courting a liberal media audience, but rather a politically conservative one, as evidenced by their news stories, which focused on support for George Zimmerman. He suggested that this contributed to very different articulations in the national public sphere about what happened on the night Trayvon died. I argue that a closer examination of popular media narratives of Trayvon and George, particularly as they began to take on a life of their own as news commodity or spectacle, is helpful to scholars and activists engaged in making sense of why the Zimmerman trial verdict was so controversial and divisive. Black commentators like Sharpton, who is also a spokesman for the Martin family, became a peddler of news stories that promoted a kind of “politics of respectability” much like other national black journalists and pundits. These kinds of liberal commentators on stations like MSNBC and BET were heavily invested in defending Trayvon from being portrayed as a criminal, while deflecting attention from larger systemic and structural critiques, which ultimately served to derail needed conversations about race, power, and privilege. Simultaneously, right-wing media was heavily invested in mak-

ing Trayvon culpable for his own death and exonerating Zimmerman predicated upon race-neutrality and post-racialism.¹⁰

In the case of Trayvon we see two themes emerge: a dominant narrative and a counternarrative. In the dominant narrative that ultimately bolstered the acquittal of George Zimmerman, Trayvon is a “thug” out of place in a gated community to which he doesn’t belong. So powerful was the narrative of Trayvon as a thug that the *Huffington Post* began reporting on Fox News and their intensity in mischaracterizing the teen as such. He is wearing a hoodie—the uniform of threatening black youth (incidentally, in this case, the hoodie is not symbolically represented as the uniform of Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg). To this, conservative commentator Geraldo Rivera suggested on *Fox & Friends* that Trayvon invoked his own death: “You dress like a thug, people are going to treat you like a thug.” He is looking suspicious. He is noncompliant in answering questions when approached by Zimmerman. Social media circulated pictures of Trayvon in an effort to make him match the narrative of black youth as out of control and to be feared. Photos of other people like rap artist The Game and another entirely different Trayvon Martin wearing sagging pants and flipping the bird to the camera moved through social networks and in the blogosphere throughout the Zimmerman trial as fact.¹¹

Of course, there is, and must be, a counternarrative of Trayvon. This is much more akin to the truth—that of a young man who, as his teacher said, is an “A to B student majoring in cheerfulness.” Trayvon was the stepson of a woman who lived in the gated



Ebony magazine covers, September 2013

community in which he was murdered, and he had a right to be there. He was a good friend to Rachel Jantel, his best friend, who played a pivotal role herself in the media spectacle as a witness in the Zimmerman trial. He was walking home in the evening with an iced tea and a bag of candy. He was stalked and murdered. Much of the imagery circulating in social media and in popular online press featured images that promoted solidarity and compassion for Trayvon, such as the series of *Ebony* magazine covers that circulated and were written about by news outlets including HuffingtonPost.com.¹²

These media portrayals of black celebrities like NBA star Dwayne Wade and his sons, filmmaker Spike Lee and his son, Hollywood actor Boris Kodjoe and his son, and the Martin family themselves on *Ebony* magazine covers drew together communities of support and solidarity. Websites and images for “We Are Not Trayvon” brought stories and photographs of people who articulated their privilege that would likely keep them protected from extrajudicial racial violence. The social media Facebook status “I Am Not Trayvon” by Bob Seay, a school music director from Lamar, Colorado, went viral in pro-

test and was covered by major news outlets like *USA Today*.¹³

What we know is that despite the efforts at counternarrative and empathetic outpourings, the dominant narrative of black criminality prevailed in one of the most important sites of power—the courtroom. We know that black male identity in the mass media is largely a fabricated one of gangbanging and of pathology, which in itself is a major profit center stemming from consumption of music, music videos, apparel, video games, and Internet play. The production of Trayvon as a commodity narrative is aptly described by Ronald Jackson in his critiques of representations of black masculinity as “violent derelicts that must be tamed.” These ideas serve to bolster a host of powerful commercial interests as previously discussed. Jackson and David Leonard each provide detailed examinations of the ways in which black male bodies are “consistently scripted as an inherently violent, irresponsible, and angry street urchin, while the White male body is scripted as a young, innocent, and immature individual.”¹⁴

The spectacle, then, is about the commodification of not just the material world; it

is engaged in commodifying ideas and experiences. This, I would argue, is at the core of the case of Trayvon and George. In this legal and civil case, we see the politics of power over ideas and experiences of race and racism. Ideas about who has legitimate rights serve to bolster the creation of products and industries that are buttressed by the racial binary and history of race relations in America. Leonard and Lisa Guerrero bring attention to this in their critique of the surge of activities that trivialize the realities of black and white life in the United States, using the iconography of Trayvon and George:

By now, you likely have seen the vile and reprehensible “Trayvon Martin and George Zimmerman” Halloween costume. It traffics in racism, finding pleasure in black death. It reflects a broader ideology as it relates to lack of empathy for black life and so much more. It is also a commentary of the genuine callousness of people. Like racism, this is nothing new. It does, however, follow a new trend—Trayvoning meme, business profiting off selling Trayvon shooting targets, Trayvon video games, and racist Halloween costumes from the U.S. to Australia—that highlights the intransigence of antiblack racism.¹⁵

Central to these deeply intertwined social, political, and economic interests are the policies of the state, which include procedures that protect the innocence of whiteness and sustain the alleged and largely manufactured violent criminality of blackness. An emergent feature of these policies is collusion between private industry and state legislatures to cowrite new legal man-

dates. With support from organizations like the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), whose members also have included companies in the media industries as well as companies dependent upon incarcerated labor in the manufacturing of their products and services, the mechanisms for ensuring justice for Trayvon need closer examination.¹⁶

The Legal Right to Fear Blackness

Abstracted ideas about racialized violence foment interest by organizations like ALEC, an organization that “works to advance the fundamental principles of free-market enterprise, limited government, and federalism at the state level through a nonpartisan public-private partnership of America’s state legislators, members of the private sector and the general public” (alec.org, 2013). The organization’s model is to coauthor legislation among lobbyists and the private sector to make way for private-sector gains. A roster of clients and funders is an exhaustive list of major corporations that include Comcast, Time-Warner Cable, Koch Industries, the National Rifle Association, and lesser known lobbying and consulting organizations like the American Bail Coalition, State Budget Solutions, and Koch Companies Public Sector, LLC. ALEC has been crucial in developing model legislation that has led to privatized detention centers, prisons, and development of “Stand Your Ground” legislation. Their work in the legislative realm includes sponsoring the Castle Doctrine, also known as the “shoot first” law that George Zimmerman used in his defense, which ul-

timately afforded him an acquittal. What is crucial about the “shoot first” law is that it gives immunity to civilians who shoot on the basis of feeling threat, which serves as the pretext for a citizen to “stand his or her ground and meet force with force, including deadly force.” In April 2012, ALEC disbanded a Public Safety and Elections Task Force that developed the aforementioned model legislation amid increasing calls for corporations to divest their memberships in the organization, according to the site ALEC Exposed, a project of the Center for Media and Democracy and *The Nation* magazine.¹⁷

Over the past year, ALEC has seen more than fifty major U.S. companies leave its ranks, many of whom did so as exposure about ALEC’s engagement in supporting controversial bills came to light. Companies with a significant African American consumer base like Coca-Cola, McDonald’s, Kraft, and Pepsi responded to protests over their involvement in an organization that specifically supported “Stand Your Ground” and voter ID legislation that served to suppress voter participation and roll back civil rights voting gains. Many of the withdrawals by major corporations from ALEC were in response to direct inquiries from Color of Change, an organization focused on making governmental and corporate bodies more responsive to the concerns of black Americans. Simultaneously, ALEC has effectively led state legislators to undoing public safety nets and dismantling civil and voter rights laws that would strengthen protections for people who are unduly targeted politically, economically, and socially because of their racial, gender, or class position, according to John Nichols, writer for *The Nation*.¹⁸

Racial Discourses of the Spectacle

Andrew Hacker argues in his canonical work that the pervasive personal and institutional racism by whites that presume inferiority of blacks is at the core of racial disparity and violence toward black America. Evidence of these two Americas was reflected in the media polling surrounding the acquittal of George Zimmerman. Last summer, two separate polls found Americans divided racially and politically over the trial. The Pew Research Center poll found 86 percent of black respondents were unhappy with the verdict, compared with 30 percent of whites. A *Washington Post*–ABC poll found 87 percent of African Americans believed the shooting was *not* justified, versus 33 percent of white Americans. The two groups were also divided over whether the issue of race was too much of a focus in the discourse around the case. The Pew poll found 78 percent of blacks said it raised “important issues about race that need to be discussed,” while 60 percent of whites thought race “received too much attention.”¹⁹

Public opinion on the Web also revealed interesting results. A close reading of Google searches on the names of Trayvon Martin and George Zimmerman conducted on October 21, 2013, long after most stories had cycled out of the news, revealed the tenor of some of the public’s sentiment toward the two. Previous research on commercial search engines reveals the ways in which both popularity of terms and the linkages of Web results to advertising in Google is a site of profit for the media giant. Google has come under scrutiny for the ways in which it demonstrates how popular searches also



Google search on "Trayvon Martin was"



Google search on "George Zimmerman is"

bias our understanding of complex ideas about race and gender. Google autosuggest (see above) reveals the way in which spectacle is sustained in the case of Trayvon Martin and George Zimmerman.

These searches on Trayvon Martin's name are telling about the enduring ways in which he was criminalized and put on trial in the court of public opinion online, and reveal quite a different story about the nature of the narratives that are both constructed and circulated with great popularity on the Web. Web results and their popularity are also linked to websites that are profitable for Google, meaning there is a complex relationship between search results and advertising models created by Google's search algorithms.²⁰

Part of what is troubling about Trayvon Martin and George Zimmerman's status on the Web as mediated by Google is that their commodity status had the potential to cloud the ability to read the action of killing a black person, and by extension black people, in social and historical context. Searches online demonstrate the way in which, as Lisa Cacho described, "a young, Black, male criminal was on trial, yet there was no Black criminal

charged with a crime." Robin D. G. Kelley, writing for the *Huffington Post*, put it this way:

In short, it was Trayvon Martin, not George Zimmerman, who was put on trial. He was tried for the crimes he may have committed and the ones he would have committed had he lived past 17.

Additional images and narratives circulated powerfully online in a number of black blogs like *NewBlackMan (in exile)*, edited by Mark Anthony Neal, the *Crunk Feminist Collective*, and *Gradient Lair*, and provided important black feminist critiques of the way in which the discourses about how Trayvon and George were being consumed in the spectacle. *Gradient Lair* wrote a post on July 15, 2013, titled, "How Racism Makes Trayvon Martin's Death Just Another Object for Consumption." Blog author Trudy uses black feminist and womanist lenses to reflect upon the financial opportunities arising from Trayvon's death, including a book deal for a juror, increased social media traffic on a Facebook page that promotes racism toward Trayvon, and a "Zimmerman MMA training program at a gym," among others.²¹

Guy Debord's ideas reemerged in the blogosphere as an analytical framework for thinking about Trayvon, as David Leonard and Lisa Guerrero note in their powerful essay on the spectacle:

But the examples of racialized disregard that have surrounded Trayvon Martin's death, most recently exemplified in the commodification, "meme-ification," and "costume-ification" of the tragedy by various White people marks a startling new mechanization of racism wherein there has been a complete evacuation of humanity . . . on both sides. The dehumanization of people of color and other marginalized groups is, sadly, no longer surprising, but that dominant groups so readily diminish their humanity through the willful participation in acts of oppression like donning a blackface costume of Trayvon, and enacting violence against his "body" only highlights the ways in which "humanity" has no commodity value in American society in the 21st century. In these moments, Trayvon's humanity becomes increasingly and insidiously taken over by consumption and performance, while white humanity is used as mere currency in this racist transaction.²²

Leonard and Guerrero locate the "meme-ification" of Trayvon squarely in the spectacle, which is necessary for repurposing conversations about black guilt and white innocence—both in the actual incident and in the media aftermath. The right to create and disseminate images, products, and punditry on the Web as both intellectual property and free speech further protects this process

of meme-ification. Derision of blackness is a property right in the United States in the ways critical race theorists argue whiteness is a form of property. I argue that by extension fears, attitudes, pleasures, and anxieties are forms of property that were protected in this case as well. Leonard and Guerrero's work offers an opening for thinking about the ways in which property and rights are central to understanding the power of "racist transactions" that are traded materially and symbolically. It is with this understanding of how Trayvon and George are performed and consumed in social and mass media that I turn my attention to more evidence of such transactions.²³

Black Feminist Responses to the Spectacle

In many ways, the spectacle that consumed the narratives circulating around Trayvon is a quintessential "eating of the other" that black feminist scholar bell hooks wrote about in 1992. Eating the other speaks to the uncontrolled fetishizing of the black body that results in consumption of "the other" in white imaginaries through cultural and physical appropriations, which I argue continue in the recasting of Trayvon's death by non-black youth. Among the many public lamentations over Trayvon, a popular passage from hooks's book *All About Love: New Visions* (2000) went viral throughout Facebook and Twitter as if it were a present-day commentary on the Zimmerman trial verdict:

The growing number of gated communities in our nation is but one example of the

obsession with safety. . . . The person who is really the threat here is the home owner who has been so well socialized by the thinking of white supremacy, of capitalism, of patriarchy that he can no longer respond rationally. White supremacy has taught him that all people of color are threats irrespective of their behavior. Capitalism has taught him that, at all costs, his property can and must be protected. Patriarchy has taught him that his masculinity has to be proved by the willingness to conquer fear through aggression; that it would be unmanly to ask questions before taking action. Mass media then brings us the news of this in a news-speak manner that sounds almost jocular and celebratory, as though no tragedy has happened, as though the sacrifice of a young life was necessary to uphold property values and white patriarchal honor. . . . This is what the worship of death looks like.²⁴

Alternative, black feminist critiques were not the norm in the spectacle and would have undermined the commodity value of Trayvon Martin had they been central to the popular national discourse online or in mass media.

What instead circulated were dominant narratives that made Trayvon an intensified object of consumption and humor for the pleasure of its audiences. Many of the more problematic images circulating were memes mocking the crime scene and death of Trayvon. In a 2013 viral sensation called “Trayvoning,” young men (mostly white) posed and took pictures of themselves for circulation on the Web. This Internet viral fad was readily critiqued by black feminist bloggers at the Crunk Feminist Collective and by Da-



Popular “Trayvoning” photos circulating the Internet circa summer 2013

vid Leonard and Lisa Guerrero on Mark Anthony Neal’s popular black academic blog. Popular images of the meme included Trayvoning in various poses.²⁵

Leonard and Guerrero poetically blogged about the ways in which “Trayvoning recasts and performs injustice by turning someone’s pain and suffering into a spectacle of white pleasure that further denies the humanity of black people.” They remind their readers:

The disregard for Black life, and the disparagement of Black death is nothing new; the pleasure and joy garnered from Black suffering and dreams deferred has been cen-

tral to White supremacy throughout United States history. Evident in minstrel shows, the history of lynching, and jokes about racial profiling or the war on drugs, whites have always found joy in the violence experienced by African Americans.²⁶

This lack of emotional or empathic connection is called the “racial empathy gap,” and this concept was captured as an attempt at making sense of the stances of jurors in the Zimmerman trial as reported on CNN.com. In June 2013, news outlets began reporting on the work of Jason Silverstein, whose review of the racial empathy gap literature revealed how blackness is perceived as harder, and as feeling less pain than that of whites. His research also revealed increased empathy toward people with more privilege. Lisa Wade commented on the racial empathy gap among law school students she overheard discussing sentencing this way: “I gave the rich guy a lesser sentence because I figured, since he had such a cushy life, it would take less punishment to get through to him.” It is this kind of evidence and its coupling with the real-life concerns of black people over social and economic inequality, the school-to-prison pipeline, mass incarceration, and two-tiered forms of justice that help undergird the many reasons this case is seen so differently from whites. Narratives about the disposable nature of black life reminds many of the vigilantes in the form of untried and unpunished Ku Klux Klansman, night riders, slave hunters, police officers, security guards, and even so-called unofficial neighborhood watchmen who perform extrajudicial acts of violence on black lives, most often without consequence.²⁷

Tracing these historical constructions of race provides more information about the context in which Internet memes, search engine results, and media narratives function as an expression of a series of social, political, and economic relations—relations often obscured and normalized in technological practices. It begs the question that if the Internet and the media are tools for progress, understanding, and advancement, then *cui bono*—to whose benefit is it? I argue that in this case, it is to the greatest benefit of the spectacle, which profits handsomely.²⁸

Teaching Trayvon, Teaching the Spectacle

The power of the neoliberal historical moment is the constant decontextualization and ahistorical approach to making sense of our realities. It divorces the historical production of ideologies of racism from the moment, and it invents new terms like “post-racial” to foment the erasure of the past. It obscures our understanding of history and capitalism so that we cannot make sense of the present as part of an ongoing dialectical process in everyday life. In the case of Trayvon and George, it focuses us on the unique and individual aspects of their personalities, their life stories, and their guilt or innocence in the actions that led to Trayvon’s death. It situates the conflict in the moment between two people. It gives rise to statements like, “We weren’t there, so we can never know what really happened.” It robs us of opportunities to make sense of the spectacle and its subversions presented as uncontested fact or dominant narrative.²⁹

During the Zimmerman trial I taught a class on “Race, Gender, Sexuality, and the Information Professions” for graduate students studying to become library and information science professionals. The verdict was rendered while I was teaching this course on theories of power in the information professions. Most of the class responded to the verdict by thinking about the ways in which information professionals, not unlike journalists, are implicated in helping the public make sense of race relations and the impending grief facing many of the communities in which they are practicing librarians or information technology managers and workers. Collectively, we cultivated a website and online library at teachingtrayvon.org to organize and disseminate research and public opinion pieces about racialization, privilege, and power. This effort, led by doctoral student LaTasha Velez and graduate student Victoria Moré, like many academic responses, is part of an intellectual contribution to diffuse the spectacle of the moment by offering a longer, historical view of social, political, and economic binaries in which privilege, and lack thereof, are central to life in the United States and around the globe. The paradox of the spectacle is that it creates both markets of consumption and audiences of resistance, like our project and the many efforts still being organized and imagined.

Conclusion

I make comparisons in this close reading of media artifacts through critical discourse analysis in relation to the social and material construction of whiteness and blackness for

the purposes of making more explicit the discursive representations of Trayvon’s identity against an often unnamed and unacknowledged background of normativity. Historic cultural gazes about “the other” in traditional media and entertainment such as minstrel shows, racist films, television produced in Hollywood, and Wild West narratives, and whiteness and blackness as material and symbolic concepts were consolidated in the spectacle of George and Trayvon. I argue that we should problematize and reject dehistoricized media representations of young black people made guilty for transgressing spaces and places in which their color, race, and class allegedly barred them. These practices of the spectacle subvert and derail opportunities for empathic discourse and social change. We cannot afford to have critiques of the material and economic benefits derived from these practices linger on the margins. Instead, rather than obscure or trivialize these profound and complicated issues through a middle-class politics of respectability, we might foreground the histories of those being profiled, stopped, and frisked, those made the objects of manhunts, or of police pursuits—all of which are linked to histories of property, ownership, and entitlement.

Reframing black boys like Trayvon Martin or Emmett Till, who was lynched in 1955 and his white male (alleged, because they were not convicted) murderers were acquitted, must be tied to the questions about the persistent context of both capitalism and globalization. Sundiata Cha-Jua characterizes these past forms of control over black bodies, through lynching in particular, as a central feature of labor exploitation in the

plantation economy. Lynching was most often tied to threats and accusations of murder, or perceived and real threat of harm to white land owners. Keeping black bodies under control was fully situated within these past economic production processes. In the present-day context of new forms of global capitalism, Trayvon and his disposability and death in a private gated community could be representative of the *lack* of importance or centrality of black people in the emergent globally racialized and gendered capitalist economy.³⁰

We need to understand and parse what narratives are being upheld and legitimated through the spectacle and cultivate critical digital media and information studies research to make sense of it. We have both a passive consumption of the narratives of race (and the obscuring of racism) happening by people who refuse or are largely ignorant of the racial past and present through erasure. We also have the spectacle itself—the reified narratives of Trayvon Martin and George Zimmerman, which take on a symbolic and material life of their own as a proxy for avoiding substantive public and economic policy addressing race, gender, class, and power inequality and oppression. George Lipsitz argued it this way:

As long as we define social life as the sum total of conscious and deliberate individual activities, then only individual manifestations of personal prejudice and hostility will be seen as racist. Systemic, collective, and coordinated behavior disappears from sight. Collective exercises of group power relentlessly channeling rewards, resources,

and opportunities from one group to another will not appear to be “racist” from this perspective because they rarely announce their intention to discriminate against individuals. But they work to construct racial identities by giving people of different races vastly different life chances.³¹

Lipsitz’s analysis forces engagement with conversations that the spectacle obscures.

An unobscured view brings to light media investments in private prisons and detention centers. It centers the inappropriateness of political machines like ALEC that are working on systemic privatization of the public sphere. Breaking through the spectacle sheds light on profitability schemes that are predicated upon the cultivation of criminality narratives in the media, and the warehousing of black and Latino (mostly non-violent offenders) bodies to serve as prison labor for corporations. What the spectacle of the mass media has failed to do yet is help us reframe our ability to talk about race, power, and privilege in the long view. This requires knowledgeable people who have studied history and critical theories of race, feminism, and power. It requires expertise and commitment to help us contextualize race in the United States and it takes intentional reframing. It does not lend itself to a 24/7 news cycle with ten-minute news segments, or to Internet memes. It requires time and space to explore the traditions from which racial incidents emerge and to locate them in sociohistorical context. We must continue to interrogate how the spectacle swallows whole the story, and spits back little to dismantle systems of violence.

Notes

1. Sanchez, "The Anatomy of Media Bias"; Fairclough, *Analysing Discourse*; Harris, "Whiteness as Property."

2. Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*.

3. Malcolm X Grassroots Movement, "Report on Black People Executed without Trial."

4. MWB is a phrase coined by the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement.

5. Fairclough, *Analysing Discourse*, 8.

6. *Ibid.*, 9.

7. See Trinkle, "Million Shares Club," for more information on major financial institutions that own more than 1 million shares of private prison stock, which include major music industry holdings; *Beard v. United States*—158 U.S. 550 (1895) Supreme Court Center. Decided May 27, 1895. <https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/158/550/case.html>. This case served as the pretext for federal case law providing a legal claim to self-defense in the case of a criminal homicide on one's premise, should there be reasonable fear that bodily harm or threat is present.

8. Alexander, *The New Jim Crow*; Cacho, "Talking Trayvon; Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins."

9. Journalist and hip-hop historian Davey D. has reblogged about the relationship between the commercial rap music industry and private prisons in an article previously published by Homeboy Sandman for the *Huffington Post* (no longer available). A repost of the article can be found at hiphopandpolitics.com/?s=jail+house+roc. On media conglomerates, see Frontline, "Media Giants." Lloyd-Miller, "What Will Viacom's Top Institutional Shareholders Make of This Revived Partnership?" See GEO Group Inc. Institutional Ownership at NASDAQ online: nasdaq.com/symbol/geo/institutional-holdings. Scopia Capital Management's second largest holding as of September 9, 2013, was GEO Group: nasdaq.com/quotes/institutional-portfolio/scopia-capital

-management-llc-621074?sortname=valuesofshare&sorttype=1.

10. Inskeep, "Examining Coverage of the Trayvon Martin Case."

11. Boehlert, "Trayvon Martin and Why the Right-wing Media Spent 16 Months Smearing a Dead Teenager." See snopes.com/photos/politics/martin.asp, an online resource by Barbara and David P. Mikkelson for dispelling Internet gossip and misinformation or urban legends.

12. Prieto and Nolin, "Tensions Still Simmer in Trayvon Martin Shooting Case"; Wilson, "Ebony 'Trayvon' covers."

13. wearenottrayvonmartin.com website and Facebook page at <https://www.facebook.com/WeAreNotTrayvon>; Ausien, "I Am Not Trayvon Post Goes Viral."

14. Jackson, *Scripting the Black Masculine Body*, 80, 82; Leonard, "Young, Black (or Brown), and Don't Give a Fuck."

15. Leonard and Guerrero, "Trick-or-Treating While White," 1.

16. ALEC Exposed: alecexposed.org/wiki/Investor_Open_Letter. McCormack, "Prison Labor Booms as Unemployment Remains High."

17. See ALEC Exposed for list of corporate clients; sourcewatch.org/index.php/ALEC_Corporations; see American Legislative Exchange Council, "Private Enterprise" Membership, organizational membership brochure, July 2011; Assembly, No. 159, State of New Jersey, 213th Legislature, the "New Jersey Self Defense Law." May 6, 2008. njleg.state.nj.us/2008/Bills/A0500/159_I1.PDF; John Nichols, "ALEC Disbands Task Force Responsible for Voter ID, 'Stand Your Ground' Laws." April 17, 2012. thenation.com/blog/167425/alec-disbands-task-force-responsible-voter-id-stand-your-ground-laws.

18. See sourcewatch.org/index.php?title=Corporations_that_Have_Cut_Ties_to_ALEC; Liston and Geller, "Coke Withdraws from Group that Backs Stand Your Ground Law"; Wilce, "Intuit Out of ALEC"; Harris, "Letter from Pat Harris."

19. Hacker, *Two Nations*; Pew Research Center, "Big Racial Divide over Zimmerman Verdict"; Cohen, "Zimmerman Verdict."

20. Noble, "Google Search"; Noble, "Searching for Black Girls."

21. Cacho, "Talking Trayvon"; Kelley, "The U.S. v. Trayvon Martin"; "How Racism Makes Trayvon Martin's Death Just Another Object for Consumption."

22. Leonard and Guerrero, "Trick-or-Treating," 1.

23. Ibid.

24. hooks, *Black Looks*; hooks, *All About Love*.

25. Crawley, "Trayvoning and Distance"; New Black Man (in Exile) at newblackman.blogspot.com; source of images: "Shameful Trayvoning Fad Sweeping the Internet."

26. Guerrero and Leonard, "Playing Dead."

27. Silverstein, "I Don't Feel Your Pain"; Trawalter, Hoffman, and Waytz, "Racial Bias in Perceptions of Others' Pain"; Obeidallah, "Our Lack of Racial Empathy Is Appalling"; Wade, "The Racial Empathy Gap"; on extrajudicial violence against blacks, see: Malcolm X Grassroots Movement, "Report on Black People Executed Without Trial."

28. Noble, "Google"; Winner, *The Whale and the Reactor*; Pacey, *The Culture of Technology*.

29. Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*.

30. Cha-Jua, "'A Warlike Demonstration'"; Cha-Jua, in discussion with Safiya U. Noble.

31. Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness*, 381.

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