On Racial Icons

Blackness and the Public Imagination

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Introduction

From early on, I was aware that my experience of being a young black girl was one of living in relationship to images of blackness and black subjects that circulated broadly in the public sphere. As a child, I knew that I had no control over these images and how they were disseminated, but that many of my interactions in public spaces, with blacks and non-blacks, would be in conversation with these images. I also knew that those images, more often than not, presented a challenge to my existence, to being able to occupy space without expectation, deficit, or reaction. How did I know these things on such a guttural level as early as the third grade, in particular given that I grew up in a majority black neighborhood and went to a predominantly black elementary school?

On Racial Icons is a meditation on how we—as a broad American public—fixate on certain images of race and nation, specifically the black icon. In examining the significance of the racial icon to public life in the United States, the book attempts to understand the particular and peculiar relationship between the nation, representation, and race in the context of the history of U.S. slavery and the present of enduring racial inequality. To consider the racial icon as a negotiation of the historical present, the book focuses on the significance and valuation of key black political, social, and cultural figures and the meaning that the national public attaches to such icons.
My hope is that this inquiry provides an opportunity to think with readers about race, nation, and American public culture through photographic representation.

The book grows out of a rich body of scholarship, art, and criticism on race and visual culture. Much of this previous work examines and historicizes the production and meaning of visual images of black subjects within black communities and the nation-state. In such work, scholars have shown how the development and rise of popular and journalistic photography correlates to organized intellectual, cultural, and political movements of black Americans toward freedom, citizenship, and racial justice. Important scholarship has also shown how black activists and artists have used image as a weapon to fight racial oppression. In the pages that follow, I offer various case studies of the making and circulation of racial icons, focusing primarily on the medium of photography, instead of a historical account of the racial icon. To engage with the diverse images in this study, I use interdisciplinary methods from the fields of visual culture, critical race and ethnic studies, and American studies. What this effort entails is a close focus on specific images, a concern about the conditions of production and the historical context out of which images emerge, and attention to the images’ circulation and reception in the public sphere during different historical moments.

The images here that serve as the subject of our meditation are easily accessible in the public sphere: activism, political leadership, celebrity, and sports. They are familiar visuals to many in the United States, and members of a global media sphere have easy access. In this respect, these are “public images,” meant for broad consumption. They might be found in newspapers, on billboards, in magazines and books, and on political posters and album covers. They might be used to promote a political, cultural, economic, or social agenda. Some are in the public domain and are repurposed for new audiences. Many circulate virally through the Internet and social media sites. Access to such images changes, as does their production, consumption, and reception. These case studies—of photography, a medium known for its two-dimensionality and often characterized (disputably) by its stillness—unfold in a multi-textured arena where the racial icon is widely consumed in the midst of persistent, quotidian, and extreme racial inequality and suffering. And thus, the racial icon presents a challenge. Inasmuch as it stands for a marking of a democratic notion of racial trajectory, it continues to serve as a plea for recognition and justice for black Americans in light of historical and ongoing forms of racism.

Within the broad category of public images, I am interested in those that are normative to our understanding of race in the United States; these are images that have a commonsense meaning to them in terms of the national imaginary and a broad public’s familiarity with them. They are interwoven into how a dominant, media-saturated American public understands race as interstitial to the formation of the nation. By American public, I do not mean to suggest that there is one definition of Americans or what constitutes the public. Instead, I use American public as a fraught concept, a necessary fiction of how various constituents, populations, and individuals make sense of the nation as a collective body.

The images chosen here are not simply supplements or illustrations of race but are part of the production and circulation of the racial narrative of this country. Thus visualizing is integral to narrating the nation. Images do not convey one single message, nor do they speak to one single, unified audience. The iconic images that I examine here as they relate to nation building and constituting an American public can be read and used for entirely different purposes. What might seem radical or anti-establishment in one era can be incorporated into dominant messages at another historical moment, and vice
versa. Regardless of whether images are used in ways that some consider regressive and others progressive, how do racial iconic images become part of the story that Americans tell each other and the world about the unfolding of nation and the possibility of democracy?

Partly, this question can be answered by considering the logic of “our” attachments to certain public images that have come to represent, symbolize, or substitute for a larger historical narrative of race and blackness in the United States. These images often carry a sort of public burden, in their attempts to transform the despised into the idolized. In their formal and symbolic characteristics of ideation, they work against the long and voluminous history of degrading racial caricatures. Such caricatures run the gamut from turn-of-the-twentieth-century pickaninny and Little Sambo postcards to hyperbolic violent and sexualized filmic representations (The Birth of a Nation as the quintessential film in such terrorizing image production) to more seemingly benign images of blacks as servants and caregivers to whites (that continue in contemporary popular culture with films like The Help and Lee Daniel’s The Butler). As a counterbalance to intentionally demeaning characterization, racial icons can serve to uplift, literally and symbolically, “the black race” and the nation.

Racial icons, especially in the realm of social and political movements, make us want to do something. These images can impact us with such emotional force that we are compelled: to do, to feel, to see. While the affective responses (what one might call the impulse to act or the urgency expressed in some images) are familiar and rehearsed, our individual and collective actions are not predictable or easy to measure in any specific, linear, or causal way, as I discuss in chapter 1 through an examination of the motley and shifting sense of the collective and the divergent responses to Trayvon Martin’s death. The large imprint of these emotional responses and collective actions has to do with Martin’s tragic death, and also his iconization through visual production.

**Icon: The Veneration of Image**

The history of the icon is long and complex. A term of divination, the icon is rooted in a desire to represent, and thus produce, God. There are many traditions (Byzantine, Russian, Eastern Orthodox, Coptic) of icons—paintings of religious figures—as sacred art that date back to early Christianity. In these contexts, the icon was not only a representation of the sacred but was itself a mode of prayer; a well-known example is the Black Madonna of Częstochowa, Poland (date unknown). This iconic painting is imbued with sacred power for its worshippers; every year tens of thousands of pilgrims come to behold the black Madonna and baby Jesus. While the painting is atypical in representing Mary and Jesus with darker skin (some believe due to candle residue, smoke, and flares over the course of its life), the painting is representative of the sacred art of icon painting in many other respects. Icons tend to be flat panel devotional paintings in which religious figures are represented to emphasize their holiness through symbols such as halos and color, where gold is representative of heaven and red of divine life. The features and poses of the religious figures are restrained and uniform to emphasize their transcendent, heavenly status.²

In Black Madonna of Częstochowa, Madonna gestures toward Jesus—the anticipated return of the Messiah, the Christian savior of humanity (see figure 1). We find this sort of anticipation and willful and devout hope in many contemporary renditions of the icon. Scholar Małgorzata Oleszkiewicz-Peralba analyzes how the Black Madonna icon of Poland and other parts of Europe and Latin America is a syncretic icon bringing together “Catholicism, Amerindian traditions, African orisha worship, and eastern and central European and Iberian cultures, as well
as the emergence of the ‘great mother’ figure in Latin America.” Moreover, she examines how this transatlantic icon represents resistance, empowerment, and a symbol of nation in different contexts.

The style of iconographic representation has evolved from its early Christian origins in religious painting, but across time, geographic region, and other boundaries, the icon continues to embody form as a sacred figure at the hand of the artist. Esteemed scholar and author of Iconology W. J. T. Mitchell writes, “The critical study of the icon begins with the idea that human beings are created ‘in the image and likeness’ of their creator and culminates, rather less grandly, in the modern science of ‘image-making’ in advertising and propaganda.”

To produce an icon, from the inception of the term in early Christianity, is to venerate. It is a mode of deification that involves finding the godlikeness in human form. Thus early on, icons were images of honor, treated with a great deal of respect and adoration. What accompanies the icon as an image of veneration is a deep suspicion of the image and practices of representation. In earlier times, the concern was idolatry—the worshipping of objects and images. In the contemporary era, the suspicion arises through fear of audience manipulation. The inherited tension between image worship and the condemnation of representation persists.

My framing of the icon shifts throughout the following pages, as it does in public culture. At moments, the icon connotes its commonsense usage: a notable public person who represents a set of attributes, traits, or talents valued by a given society. In popular culture, the icon often refers to a celebrity with staying power. In the arenas of politics and civil society, the icon tends to refer to a charismatic leader, a dedicated advocate, or a fearless trailblazer. In visual theory, the icon is an image, like a photographic representation, imbued with significant social and symbolic meaning, so much so that it needs
little explication for the cultural reader to decode it. The icon
in contemporary culture carries multiple meanings, but I con-
tend that there remains the trace of worship and that the icon
continues to gesture toward the sacred.

While the icon carries the trace of godlikeness, to render a
subject as black within various histories and discursive traditions
means literally and symbolically to denigrate: to blacken, dis-
parage, belittle. The verb to *denigrate*, with its Latin origins and
roots in light/dark metaphors, means not only “to blacken” but
also “to defame,” “to discredit.” To denigrate is a castigation
in which darkness is associated with incivility, evil, mystery,
and the subhuman. Racial iconicity hinges on a relationship
between veneration and denigration and this twinning shapes
the visual production and reception of black American icons.
The racial icon as both a venerated and denigrated figure serves
a resonating function as a visual embodiment of American his-
tory and as proof of the supremacy of American democracy.

As much as possible, I stay away from specialized academic
language, unless necessary. I use *society* to refer to U.S. society.
I use *nation* to refer to the United States of America. Many
scholars and cultural critics use concepts such as iconicity and
iconography to talk about the processes and systems of iconic
production more so than to refer to specific examples of iconic
people or photographs. At times, I make reference to these
specific theories. In the pages that follow I attempt to create a
space for readers and myself to practice deceleration—a slowing
down to allow for a type of contemplation that seems far
too rare in our present moment. Art historian Jennifer Rob-
erts describes deceleration as “a productive process, a form of
skilled apprehension that can orient students in critical ways to
the contemporary world.” Deceleration is a useful interven-
tion in a culture that prides itself on speed and limitless distrac-
tions. The racial icon, in this context, provides opportunities
for us to pause and consider image, race, and nation, as we
examine what images come to represent the nation in specific
contexts. In so doing, I hope we gain more insight into what it
means and feels like to belong, or not.

The Photographic Icon
and Public Culture

In their influential study *No Caption Needed: Iconic Photo-
graphs, Public Culture, and Liberal Democracy*, Robert Hariman
and John Louis Lucaites define iconic photographs “as those
photographic images appearing in print, electronic, or digi-
tal media that are widely recognized and remembered, are
understood to be representations of historically significant
events, activate strong emotional identification or response,
and are reproduced across a range of media, genres, or topics.”
Hariman and Lucaites examine how iconic photojournalistic
images produce meaning about being a citizen, modern polity,
and notions of the collective in “liberal–democratic public cul-
ture.” Their theory of iconic photography and American pub-
lic culture demonstrates how the icon is a relational object—a
conversation topic—around which publics gather, debate, and
contest. However, the racial icon, while reflecting many of the
features outlined in their work, has a different affective regis-
ter pulled between the intertwined forces of denigration and
veneration. Moreover, the racial icon addresses various con-
stituents of the American public (and its many counterpublics)
in drastically different ways, given the racial icon’s tethering to
historical and present racial inequalities.

Along the lines of Hariman and Lucaites, other theorists
and cultural scholars have posed similar questions, asking why
images matter, not only to the specific racial group repre-
sented, but within a national imaginary, or to paraphrase pol-
icians, “where we are as a people.” Others have argued that
race is itself an iconic concept. W. J. T. Mitchell writes that
“race is not merely a content to be mediated, an object to be
represented visually or verbally, or a thing to be depicted in a likeness or image, but that race is itself a medium and an iconic form—not simply something to be seen, but itself a framework for seeing through or (as Wittgenstein would put it) seeing as. The racial icon then is doubly iconicized, given the conflictual relations embedded in the concept of race. Thus the racial icon—as object, photograph, or figure—acquires much of its significance from how race modifies and makes iconic, by default, images in public culture.

In focusing on black icons rendered through photographic media, I hope to demonstrate the specific features and realms of the black icon and black iconicity in American culture and the particular meaning attributed to black subjects as racial icons. One of the important distinctions is how the combined forces of veneration and denigration animate the black figure as racial icon. Unlike the Black Madonna of religious art, the contemporary black icon can never be completely purified and vaulted to a saintly status. The racial icon strives for that which is never quite reachable; thus it is, in other words, a chimera.

The racial icon is both an exceptional and a common figure. She or he is exceptional as a symbol of overcoming racial inequality and perceived inferiority; she or he is common, given the American public’s familiarity and investment in exhausted notions of race, nation, and (under)achievement. Whether a self-conscious and deliberate construction or a product of circumstance, the racial icon—as image, political figure, celebrity, or sports hero—conveys the weight of history and the power of the present moment, in which her or his presence marks the historical moment. To stand apart and to stand for are the jobs of the racial icon.

Each chapter of this book presents a set of iconic images and a sector of American public life. Chapter 1 examines how racial iconicity emerges out of continued racial terror and violence by focusing on the making of Trayvon Martin as a posthumous icon. The responses of many protestors to his murder and the viral “I am Trayvon Martin” campaigns that developed in response to his murder and the acquittal of his murderer, George Zimmerman, demonstrate the emotional power of the racial icon and how the iconic image gets deployed to garner public responses.

Chapter 2 centers on the significance of photographic representation of black leadership throughout modern social movements and civil rights struggles. Photographic genealogies of black political leadership represent self-conscious and highly orchestrated displays of race, nation, and family. These images come to serve important functions for various audiences, as seen in how cultural producers, designers, and consumers redeploy images of black political leaders to produce meaning of racial and national progress.

The iconic face of Diana Ross is the subject of chapter 3. By attending to Ross as a key celebrity icon of the civil rights and post–civil rights eras, the chapter argues that the racial icon is a tool of commerce, seduction, and fantasy identification. Motown, as a groundbreaking entertainment company founded by black entrepreneur and producer Berry Gordy, cultivated Ross as a mainstream pop icon. Ross then serves as a blueprint for many black entertainers and musicians who followed her.

Chapter 4 continues the exploration of the racial icon in popular entertainment sectors by focusing on the oft-celebrated, oft-condemned black athlete. The rarified position of the elite athlete is given considerable attention and value in American media and public culture. The professional athlete is akin to a national hero whose physical prowess and abilities are admired and praised by many. The black athlete has represented these attributes, as well as vexed notions of spectacle and threat, since the integration of professional sports. The chapter examines two contemporary black athletes, Serena Williams and LeBron James, who are precarious icons because of their uneasy relationship to
white American publics and their refusal to conform to certain expectations placed upon them in their respective sports.

The coda returns to the icon as the singular and the collective, the exceptional and the familiar. I consider the relationship between racial iconicity and racial vulnerability. This inquiry hinges on the polarity between the lauding of the racial icon and the dismissal and criminalization of black youth en masse.

The questions that animate and connect these chapters are: How does the racial icon serve as diagnostic and salve for the sickness that is the racial state? Moreover, how do the historical narratives and future trajectory of the nation hinge on the racial icon? How do history, photography, and embodiment work together to produce racial iconicity as well as obfuscate historical oversights and current dire conditions for black subjects and communities? How does the racial icon help produce a sense of national togetherness across disparate allegiances and modes of identification?

This book comes at a time when many antiracist activists and allies who seek a more just and equal nation have come to terms with the limitations of the racial icon as represented in the presidency of Barack Obama. For many, the Obama era has been a period that began with cautious hope during his first campaign, led to a growing optimism during the historic election, and then brought forth an unbelievable joy upon his first victory. This elation has been followed by a mounting frustration during his second term and impatience intermixed with disappointment, resignation, and dispassionate realism. Nonetheless, even in times of deep cynicism and resignation, the racial icon holds a hopeful promise. It is an assurance that we have achieved, or that we are on the road to achieving, that we are not slaves of history. It might also be a cry, especially in times of tragedy, that “we” will not let the mistakes of history prevent us from striving toward “a more perfect nation.”

**Chapter 1**

“I Am Trayvon Martin”

**The Boy Who Became an Icon**

*On Racial Icons* took shape in the wake of the Trayvon Martin tragedy: his murder and the acquittal of his murderer, George Zimmerman. I was in the early stages of writing this book when Trayvon Martin was killed. Shortly after his death, public awareness of his murder spread internationally. I believe that it is important to preface this chapter with such a disclosure because my choice to include Martin touches on the stickier and more troubling aspects of racial iconicity: the interworkings of misfortune and opportunity, of terror and visibility, of injustice and hopefulness, of death and immortality.

In writing this chapter, I enact a mode of racial belonging and collective mourning that is conflicted in its use of substitution and that is cathartic in its attempt to make visible and to perform a long and continual process of grieving racial violence and morbidity. The significance of Trayvon Martin's killing to national and international publics reveals how certain deaths, especially racially motivated killings, acquire representation at specific historical periods. Moreover, through this tragedy and “our” coming together to protest and mourn Martin’s killing, we might pause to consider the persistence of black vulnerability in the public sphere and how we sympathize with the suffering of some, and not of others.
On February 26, 2012, Trayvon Martin, a seventeen-year-old black American teenager, was killed while walking back to the home of his father’s fiancée from a nearby convenience store in Sanford, Florida. George Zimmerman, a neighborhood watch guard, noticed Martin walking, followed him, confronted him, and ultimately shot and killed him. After noticing Martin from his vehicle, Zimmerman called the Sanford police and reported that Martin was acting suspiciously and that he looked “like he’s up to no good” or “he’s on drugs or something.” Zimmerman identified Martin’s hoodie (a sweatshirt with a hood) as one of the features that marked Martin as suspicious. According to public records, the dispatcher told Zimmerman to remain in his vehicle and that an officer would be sent out to investigate. However, Zimmerman, as the saying goes (and as the history of American vigilantism and racism reveal), took the law into his own hands and pursued Martin nonetheless.

By the time the dispatched police car arrived, Martin was lying in a pool of his own blood, fatally wounded. It was not until the next day that Martin’s father, Tracy, would learn of his son’s fate. When the teenager was not home by the next morning, Tracy contacted the police to file a missing person report. Shortly thereafter, officers arrived at Tracy’s home. They showed a photograph of a dead Trayvon Martin and asked if this was his missing son.

With little inquiry or investigation, the killing was quickly filed as self-defense by the Sanford Police Department under Florida’s notorious justifiable use of force statute, most commonly known as the “stand your ground” law. Despite the fact that Sanford police questioned the credibility of Zimmerman’s account of the events, Zimmerman was released under this law. Even though the case was initially dismissed, these sparse facts no one disputes: that Trayvon Martin was a black boy walking home, that Zimmerman deemed him suspicious, and that Zimmerman killed him.

Less clear, as cultural theorist Matthew Pratt Guterl points out, is the racialization of Zimmerman from the standpoint of familiar narratives of black/white racism in the United States. Zimmerman was assumed to be white when the news media first began reporting the case; yet as images of him began to circulate, they appeared to reveal an “ethnic identity” other than white. Later, some media outlets labeled him as “white Hispanic” and others continued to identify him as “white.” Guterl explains: “This manifest racial ambiguity helped to complicate Zimmerman’s motives, and to provide cover for those who wished to find a rational act. It was easy to think that some white trash fellow might have gotten a little crazy with a gun and shot some poor black child. It was harder to demonize a hard-working Latino, half Peruvian, or ‘white Hispanic,’ struggling to protect his precious property values.”

The story of that tragic winter’s night in central Florida does not end there, although Martin’s life did. While the local authorities readily dismissed the case, Martin’s death reached international attention in large part due to the commitment of his parents, Sybrina Fulton and Tracy Martin, to seek justice for their son’s murder. Their efforts were aided by the viral transmission of information through the Internet and the strategic use of Martin’s image as part of their campaign for justice. In fact, many people learned about Martin’s death through online petitions that were posted on Facebook and other social network sites demanding that Sanford’s district attorney’s office bring charges against Zimmerman. The outcry and protests of millions, including several high-profile celebrities and public figures, led to an inquiry by the Department of Justice and eventual charges against Zimmerman.

A prominent strategy to garner awareness of Trayvon Martin’s death was the circulation of photographs of him as an “ordinary” teenager. I place “ordinary” in quotation marks because there is little doubt that a black teenage boy is never
seen as an “ordinary” American, let alone an “ordinary” child who deserves protection and guidance of adults and public authorities. Nonetheless, the photographs used in awareness campaigns by supporters of “Justice for Trayvon” are striking and compelling, given the context of his death and the state’s efforts to absolve his murderer.

One photograph used in protests is a black-and-white self-portrait by Martin, known as a “selfie” in the social media landscape. The selfie is a form of representation that intimately projects how one wants to be perceived by an audience, especially among one’s peers in the digital media realm. The selfie is a contemporary form of vernacular photography, the most widely practiced genre of photography since its inception. In its everydayness and the ease of access that consumers have to photographic software and technology in the contemporary era, the selfie makes self-portraiture a more common practice than in any other period in history. Although it often appears fleeting and can be erased in an instant by digital technology, the selfie is nonetheless part of the storied genre of portraiture. Like other portraits, the selfie is a deliberate representation of a public persona, a mode of self-conscious “sitting” in front of a photographic lens. Whether playful, sensuous, earnest, or aspirational, the selfie suggests a desire for recognition; it is a request for acknowledgment, an appeal to be a subject of value.

In this now famous self-portrait, Martin looks down into the lens with one shoulder raised as if he is leaning. He wears a hoodie. The lighting from above and the cap shaping his face create a halo effect. In the sheath provided by the hoodie, Martin’s face appears to float. He hovers and levitates, as his eyes peer out from under his hood. The affect is that of a foreshadowing, a speaking to audiences from the silence of death. Even as it feels as if it were a sort of premonition, Martin’s selfie is also a performance of presence. He is, at that moment, alive, self-documenting and archiving his presence for meaning and circulation. His downward tilted eyes avoid contact and yet they reveal an inquisitive gaze. This “ordinary” boy has captured an image of himself that, after his murder, circulates as a posthumous icon. The boy, who died in large part due to a “look” that rendered him suspect in public, becomes venerated through a self-image that captures that very look. With this singular photograph, we see how image and context work together to produce an icon.

As lethal and vile as racial intolerance and racial violence are, the forces of love, recognition, and the pursuit of justice are crucial to the emergence of Martin as an icon. We—as a public—know of Martin’s harrowing fate because of the courage and dedication of his parents, who began an online campaign through a petition demanding the arrest of Zimmerman circulated on the website Change.org.

The parents’ efforts led to other marches and protests. Through the embrace of Martin’s photograph as part of the
“Justice for Trayvon” campaign, we witness the emergence of an iconic photograph, but we also isolate an iconic form—the hoodie—one that has resonated in public culture for years but that has become more complexly articulated in the wake of Martin’s murder. The hoodie is an article of clothing identified with a generation of urban black young men and, for Zimmerman and many others, is a marker of black criminality. This article of clothing is steeped in the history of racialized style in the United States, in ways similar to the zoot suit of the 1940s. The zoot suit, too, was linked to racialized violence and the criminalization of black and Latino youth who wore the suit in defiance of wartime (white) patriotism. Invoking the slang term hood (as in black and Latino poor and working-class neighborhoods) as well as the functionality of a hood attached to a sweatshirt or jacket, the hoodie acquired popularity through its association with hip-hop culture and urban black athletic wear starting in the late 1980s and 1990s. For example, on the promotional material for the 1992 “hood film” Juice directed by Ernest Dickerson, late rapper and actor Tupac Shakur poses in a dark hoodie with a look of foreboding in his sideway glance. While the hoodieleg stere urban, young, masculine, and black, increasingly it has become an article of fashion for non-urban, non-black, and non-youth groups. One of the most notable examples of its wearing is by Facebook cofounder Mark Zuckerberg, who chooses to wear his signature hoodie to corporate board meetings and in public appearances.

The use of Martin’s selfie in campaigns for justice led to a form of protest in which millions of people in countries around the world donned hoodies, posed before a camera, and proclaimed “I am Trayvon Martin.” The protests took place on multiple platforms. At rallies small and large across the country, groups showed up in hoodies with signs declaring,
"I am Trayvon Martin" or "We are Trayvon Martin." Selfies were posted on personal pages of social media networks with members hooded, somber, and staring into the camera. Others used a black-and-white silhouetted graphic of a male profile in hoodie. The Miami Heat basketball team took a group photograph of the team hooded with heads bowed. Protestors who claimed "I am / We are Trayvon Martin" were politically, racially, ethnically, linguistically, and geographically diverse. They were representative of how complexly heterogeneous the twenty-first-century "American public" is. The protest portraits in this case expressed an infinite dynamism and multiple embodiment of racial iconic form, even in its tragic outcomes.6

The reaction of many to Martin's death registers subtle and enormous changes in the United States that can only be briefly sketched out here. It marks the profusion and rapid circulation of representation in the contemporary era. The number of photographs produced has mushroomed, largely because of the accessibility and relatively low cost of digital cameras embedded in portable consumer devices. The impact of digital photography continues to expand with the growth in photo-sharing sites.7 In addition, the justice for Martin protests speak to the changing perception and reception of the icon and what it means to have "staying power" in a cultural climate where the consumption of images occurs more often involuntarily and with such rapidity and plenitude that it makes it challenging to hone in on a singular image. Furthermore, these photo-based protests signal generational and racial shifts among many black and non-black protestors. Masses of protestors imagine and (temporarily) identify with blackness in ways that are not through minstrelsy, slumming, or parody. Instead, one could argue that these images symbolically demonstrate an identification with racial isolation, profiling, and forms of abject suffering associated with certain groups of blacks and other vulnerable populations in this country and elsewhere.

Figure 5. "Trayvon Martin Could Have Been Me," Obama in hoodie, July 2013. Illustration by Mario Piperni—mariopiperni.com.

In this light, many non-blacks are able to recognize a young black male as a sympathetic character—as one with whom they form a deeply emotional and performative attachment, a type of claiming—and to see the machinations of structural and quotidian racism to portray him as other.

The emotional waves of identifying with Martin reached the White House. Whether rooted in perceived or actual public pressure or a personal sense of the shared experience of racial profiling, President Barack Obama felt compelled to link his life outcomes to those of Trayvon Martin. A month after Martin's murder, the president spoke publicly about the killing. Many have argued that, as president, Obama has been cautious in speaking about race because of the expectations
of many that he should address the significance of race in the nation’s past and present. After growing tensions about Martin’s murder and pressure from the public to see justice in Florida, Obama went on record stating, “You know, if I had a son, he’d look like Trayvon.”8 The president’s words affirmed what many sympathetic to Martin’s parents felt. For some on the front line of protesting, there was cautious hope that Obama would be more vocal and active in his stance against racism. Contrarily, he was widely criticized by politically conservative commentators and constituents and was accused of race-baiting. Yet even still, after the acquittal of George Zimmerman, Obama seemed to identify even more closely with Martin. He spoke of his own experiences of being racially profiled and then stepped into the dead boy’s shoes by claiming, “Trayvon Martin could have been me.”9 His statement both led some to question what connects Obama to a seventeen-year-old boy who died so violently, so painfully, outside a gated community in Florida and helped to ensure that boy’s iconic status. Obama’s assertion seems even more intentionally.arring given how very different the backgrounds and outcomes of their lives are. What Obama was signaling was an affective kinship that linked him to Martin in a racial fraternity of being marked as public threats and being subject to extreme forms of violence because of that marking.

As much as the “I am Trayvon” campaign and the identification with Martin among broad sectors of Americans, international protestors, and the president of the United States signal important shifts in American public culture, they also raise troubling questions. Digital media make it easy to substitute and circulate oneself in place of the subject of racial violence, and the hooded selfie became a popular way to claim progressive politics with minimal efforts. The millions of portrait protests and statements taking on Martin’s identity are discomforting in this form of substitution. Simply put, none of

the hooded protestors is Trayvon Martin. They are not the dead son of Sybrina Fulton and Tracy Martin. They are alive and their future outcomes are yet to be determined. As troubling as I find this campaign, I do take heart in this affective movement of a large number of American and international publics in the face of Martin’s murder, and here the word public seems to be rightly used as it is defined—an imagined group who will never in fact meet each other.

**The Icon and Historical Recurrence**

In addition to such highly personalized identification with Martin, another significant way that many made sense of Martin’s murder was through the framework of historic recurrence. Comparisons have been made between Trayvon Martin’s murder and image and that of Emmett Till, whose battered body was captured in a photograph that also gained enormous public attention. In 1955, Till, a fourteen-year-old black boy who
lived in Chicago, was brutally murdered by a group of white men while he was visiting his relatives in Mississippi. Till’s murderers, Roy Bryant and J. W. Milam, were acquitted, but they later confessed in Look magazine. Ten Till’s torturous killing was crucial in galvanizing support for black civil rights and freedom struggles across a broad sector of national and international publics in the mid-twentieth century.

Till’s murder built awareness in large part due to his mother’s refusal to let the injustice of her son’s killing be rendered invisible. Mamie Till held an open-casket funeral for Emmett so that all could see how her son had been brutalized. “Some 50,000 people streamed in to view Emmett’s corpse in Chicago, with many people leaving in tears or fainting at the sight and smell of the body.” Because Mamie Till allowed photographs of Emmett’s funeral, including a close-up of his brutalized face to be published in Jet magazine, his murder garnered even greater outrage. Millions were moved to action or at least to greater support for civil rights after viewing the images of his dead body and disfigured face that circulated internationally through print media. Considering the impact of Emmett Till’s murder for black Americans and the growth of the civil rights movement, historian Robin D. G. Kelley asserts: “The Emmett Till case was a spark for a new generation to commit their lives to social change, you know. They said, ‘We’re not gonna die like this. Instead we’re gonna live and transform the South, so people won’t have to die like this. And if anything, if any event of the 1950s inspired young people to be committed to that kind of change, it was the lynching of Emmett Till.”

In examining the legacy of Till’s lynching and the iconic photograph of his postmortem face, scholar Myisha Priest queries: “If we follow Mamie Till’s insistence that justice begins at the moment we look at the body of Emmett Till and hold at once the vision of his humanity and what was done to him—a complicated and shifting model of resistance that motivated political action and political change throughout the civil rights movement—then we return to the idea that there is an avenue to justice to be found in his flesh. If so, what kind of justice might that be? Can there be a revelation of the flesh that does not further violate the body?” Taking up Priest’s provocation, what significance does photography play in this process of envisioning Till’s humanity and journeying toward justice through his brutalized flesh? Even more, how have specific images served as vessels for various publics in different historical periods to feel black flesh and racialized suffering?

In both the cases of Till and Martin, the raw acts are that two black boys were killed through acts of racial policing and terror and that their murderers were not convicted. There are also important distinctions between these cases and the time periods when they occurred, as well as key differences between the iconic photographs, in their reception and circulation. While the photograph of Martin lends itself to mimetic reproduction (“I am Trayvon Martin”), the photograph of Emmett Till does not. Martin’s photograph projects a type of vitality and wellness in its “typicality” as self-portraiture and “innocence” as the self-exploration of a teenager. In contrast, the brutalized and distorted features of Till’s face are the subject of memorializing, not mimesis. His posthumous face serves as transparent and horrifying visual evidence of racial violence targeted at black boys and men. Thus we cling to Martin’s iconic image and identify with him, and we hold Till’s iconic image at a distance, feeling the weight of its gravity and hoping to avoid its outcomes.

The Dead Icon on Trial; or, The Prosecution of Martin’s Image

It is not an exaggeration to write that in the weeks and months after Martin’s killing, millions of people clung to the selfie of Martin in his hoodie. The attachment to Martin’s
image and its significance to how various constituents of the American populace understand racialized embodiment, racial violence, and (lack of) access to the public sphere grew more palpable during the struggle to have Zimmerman prosecuted for Martin’s death. In the days and weeks after Martin was killed and without any public prosecutorial action, protests and identification with his image grew more urgent and virulent. Six weeks passed from Martin’s death on February 26, 2012, until special prosecutors announced charges of second-degree murder against Zimmerman on April 11. The shift from the Sanford Police Department’s initial response to the killing to Zimmerman’s indictment was solely a result of the widespread public pressure from local, regional, national, and international realms to see Zimmerman prosecuted. It is not an overstatement that protests and public opinion in support of “Justice for Trayvon” led to charges against Zimmerman.

After Zimmerman was charged, the route to “Justice for Trayvon” lay in the hands of a trial by jury (in this case, composed of one Latina and five white women). While his role as Martin’s killer was clear, the question remained whether Zimmerman would be held accountable by jury. Even more of a concern was whether the jury would hold the same biases that Zimmerman held about the murdered boy because of Martin’s race, youth, and fashion. During the trial, in the blogosphere and other media outlets, much was made of the testimony and treatment of Rachel Jeantel, the teen friend of Martin who was speaking to him by cell phone when Zimmerman approached. Jeantel was widely dismissed and disparaged because of her use of urban vernacular speech while on the stand and what was perceived as her racially inflected style and a punitive, pathologizing, reading of her body. Also apparent was the lack of preparation of the prosecutors and their assumption that Zimmerman’s conviction in the court of public opinion would translate to his being found guilty by a jury. At the same time that the prosecution stumbled, the defense borrowed the strategy of “Justice for Trayvon” protestors by using images of Martin to build their case of why Zimmerman would have feared for his life when confronting Martin. Their argument was that Martin’s photographic record—especially through social media—evidenced why Zimmerman would have seen Martin as suspicious and therefore why Zimmerman would have taken such extreme actions to protect himself and his community, as a “stand your ground” defense.

On July 13, 2013, after sixteen and a half hours of deliberating, the jury acquitted George Zimmerman of second-degree murder and manslaughter charges. Even with the media pundits questioning the prosecution’s strategy during the trial, the ruling came as a shock to national and international audiences. No one, including the defense, had doubted that Zimmerman had profiled, followed, and killed Martin. For some who had followed the televised trial closely, the verdict was not so much a surprise but another terribly painful wound, evidence yet again of the continued and flagrant disregard for black life. Given systemic racism and injustice in the United States, some scholars and critics, in fact, argued that Zimmerman’s acquittal was not an anomaly, but was an example of the workings of the U.S. nation as a racist state. Robin D. G. Kelley, writes: “The point is that justice was always going to elude Trayvon Martin, not because the system failed, but because it worked. Martin died and Zimmerman walked because our entire political and legal foundations were built on an ideology of settler colonialism—an ideology in which the protection of white property rights was always sacrosanct; predators and threats to those privileges were almost always black, brown, and red; and where the very purpose of police power was to discipline, monitor, and contain populations rendered a threat to white property and privilege.”
Immediately following Zimmerman's acquittal, there was nonstop coverage and protests against the verdict. I, like many (especially black mothers), felt and still feel heartbroken, demoralized, shocked, and enraged. For so many of us, the series of events around Martin's murder and Zimmerman's release—with the image of Martin at the center of the protests and the trial—is the reopening of a deeply painful wound. Since his death, photographs of Martin circulate as palliation and wound. In some pictures, Martin smiles; here he floats about on paper and electronically as a thoughtful and loving child and friend. We—the sympathizers and the silent majority—are encouraged to see him as earnest, curious, sweet, and innocent: an impossible stance for a black boy in a racial state where blackness is by default suspicious. In a notable photograph used by protestors to untangle the visual and symbolic codes that align blackness with deadly threat, Martin poses with his father, who hugs and kisses his son. Here a child receives recognition, protection, and guidance; this is a child who is deeply loved and cared for.

Yes, a boy was murdered. We love him in all his photographic beauty posthumously as another victim of racial violence. This boy, Trayvon Benjamin Martin, was the son of Sybrina Fulton and Tracy Martin. He was the brother of Jahvaris Fulton and a cousin and friend to many. He was born on February 5, 1995, and died one terrifying evening, shortly after his seventeenth birthday, as he walked from a convenience store. There is no longer a living Trayvon Martin to flesh out what a photograph cannot contain: his corporeal presence, an experimentation with life’s possibilities, a future based in childhood dreams, an offspring. There will never be another indexical photograph of an embodied and maturing Trayvon Martin to complicate the widely circulating images of him, especially the photograph of a dead black boy that circulates in his postmortem state.

'‘I Am Trayvon Martin’
an icon. He is all of this, and more. Martin's image has been reproduced many millions of times since he died on the sidewalk outside a gated community where he was visiting. He is a goofy boy with a young female confidant, Rachel Jeantel. He is an aspiring pilot. He enjoys watching the National Basketball Association. He poses with “grills” (removable, adorned, frontal dental pieces made of gold, platinum, or diamonds). There he is posterized, as a Facebook profile picture, as a flyer passed around to announce a demonstration, as a billboard. On T-shirts and hoodies, Martin is silhouetted. He is our baby boy whom we want to hug; he’s our warning sign of what happens to black boys. He is a threat in the minds of racist paranoia. Martin’s image moves through various locations and media platforms. Martin circulates as material object, viral transmission, traumatic wound, and historical fact. Martin lives through his image, because of our attachment to it, our attachment to the historical legacy of blacks, to black masculinity, and to the historical present of racial subjugation.

I have never worn a hoodie in honor of Martin. At the same time, I am part of the “we”-making machine, but I need to imagine that there are others, many others, who share with me the abiding wish that Sybrina and Tracy have their son, alive, and in their arms. We intimately enfold the image of Martin, smiling from under his hoodie, into our narratives of family, belonging, and love. We publicly memorialize Martin’s photograph and murder as part of the long, painful, and unfolding narratives of race, violence and the American public sphere. We are not Trayvon Martin. We are alive. Like him, though, those of us who are vulnerable to the terror and violence of racial hatred, we hold his photograph even more tenderly.

Why are we not all Marissa Alexander, a young black woman arrested when she claimed “stand your ground” for protecting herself from her abusive husband in Florida?
Notes

Introduction

1. The study benefits from important scholarship on race, gender, and visual culture by Tina Campt, Saidiya Hartman, bell hooks, John L. Jackson Jr., Kara Keeling, David Marriott, W. J. T. Mitchell, Jennifer Christine Nash, Leigh Raiford, Celine Parreira Shimizu, Krista Thompson, Maurice O. Wallace, Michele Wallace, Deborah Willis, Ivy Wilson, and many others.


8. Ibid., 28.

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14. For example, Priest points to Till’s “gouged eye, the haunting revenant” as “the predominate symbol” for memorializing him (ibid., 18).
