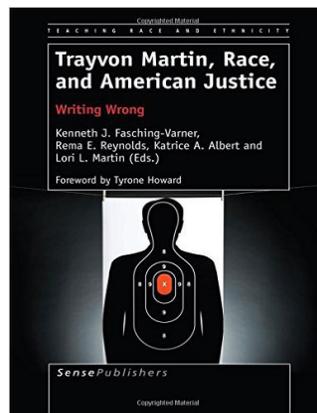

Democracy & Education

Exploring the Lingering Currency of Racism A Book Review of *Trayvon Martin, Race, and American Justice: Writing Wrong*

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THE YEAR 2015 marks the 50th anniversary of Martin Luther King leading the march from Selma to Montgomery, the 60th anniversary of the torture and killing of 14-year-old Emmett Till in Money, Mississippi, for allegedly flirting with a White woman, and the third anniversary of the death of Trayvon Martin, a 17-year-old unarmed Black young man in Sanford, Florida, fatally shot as he walked back to his father's fiancée's home from a convenience store by George Zimmerman, a member of the neighborhood community watch where Martin's father's fiancée lived. Last year, while this book was in press, our nation has witnessed the death of two additional young Black males: Michael Brown, unarmed, from multiple gunshots by a policeman sitting in his car in Ferguson, Missouri, and Eric Garner, also unarmed, in Staten Island, New York, who suffocated while in a choke hold administered by several policemen as he was heard by bystanders and on videotape over the news media gasping, "I can't breathe! I can't breathe!" These events and the recent protests across the country and social media conversations bring into ever more striking light the bias, fear, racism, and violence against Black males and other people of color within our justice system, policing practices, and culture at large.

I come to this review of *Trayvon Martin, Race, and American Justice: Writing Wrong* (Fasching-Varner, Reynolds, Albert, & Martin, 2014) through the lens of someone deeply involved in civic and spiritual work aimed at dismantling New Jim Crow policies and practices that have done egregious and disproportionate damage to individuals and families in communities of color and poverty. These policies and practices, tied largely to the war on drugs and punishment-oriented disciplinary policies based on zero tolerance and exclusionary practices in our schools, have been closely examined for their legacy of racial injustices and disparities by civil rights attorney Michelle Alexander in her widely acclaimed book *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, first published in 2010. I also come to this review having seen classrooms and schools that have been plagued by racial inequities in school discipline transformed by moving from punishment-exclusionary approaches to restorative practices in

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dealing with student behavior, resulting in a more positive and just school climate for all.

We are now fortunate to have this remarkable collection of writings that investigates how Martin Trayvon's death has brought into a sharp light critical questions about the role of race in the our nation and the erroneous assumptions held by many that we are living in a color-blind, postracial 21st century. The authors explored the legacy and lingering currency of racism in our nation that encapsulate us all, especially the cultural narratives and stereotypes of what it means to be a Black male. They wrote with courage, insight, honesty, and passion as they offered first-person narratives; theoretical analysis, often through the lens of critical race theory; research findings; and stunning poems that are raw and truth telling, including Anthony Hill's poem that opens the book—"A Prayer for African Boys for Successful Transition to Boyhood"—FreQuency's "The 7 Deadly American Sins," Bryan Ellis's "Viciousness," and Torin Jacobs's "Revolutionary in Uniform."

In their introduction, the editors challenged us to "enter the thinking and feeling spaces created by the authors to explore the various inequities and racial problematics the incident and its subsequent case reveal" (Fasching-Varner, Reynolds, Albert, & Martin, 2014, p. 3). These spaces include confronting our ignorance, implicit biases, and assumptions about Blackness and the Black male in particular, as well as exploring our blindness to institutional and systemic racism, including the White shroud of privilege, fear, and repression that is so often at the root of unjust policies and practices in our institutions and culture. I was reminded throughout the book that many of the policies so often justified by what many people claim to believe serve the noblest of ends, such as reducing crime and winning the war on drugs through mandatory minimum sentences and three-strikes laws and keeping our schools safe through strict punishment codes, can turn out be the most insidious and damaging policies that disproportionately affect individuals and communities of color and poverty. Sadly, they often prove to be the most difficult laws and policies to dismantle because of the tenacity of biases that undergird them.

The book is divided into five sections, and their titles reveal the organizing themes and questions explored in the book. Naming these section titles may give prospective readers a sense of the self-examination and potentially transformative, sometimes disturbing, journey they will be taking as reader, should they remain open to challenging their own biases and assumptions as well as our cultural narratives about race:

1. Trayvon Martin: Life, Death, and Race in America
2. Deconstructing Ignorance: Reactions and Responses to Racism
3. How Much More Can We Take? The Fight for Racial and Social Justice
4. Vision of a Socially Just Society: Lessons Trayvon Martin Teaches
5. What Can We Possibly Tell Our Children: Post-Verdict Conversations

All of the chapters form a remarkable weaving of issues and examples of the complexities of race and American justice today. To illustrate the range of topics, I'll cite the following chapters as illustrations of that weaving and how they continue to teach and move me as I reflect on them:

Stovall's "Killing You Is Justice: Trayvon Martin as Metaphor for the Continual Disposability of Black Life in the Eyes of the Law" offers his call to engage in a "radical healing" (Fasching-Varner, Reynolds, Albert, & Martin, 2014, p. TK) side by side with his attempt to "understand the parallels of Martin's murder with the current moment in the city in which [Stovall himself] lives—Chicago's Woodlawn neighborhood—an extension of a police state, one of the most segregated cities in the world" (Fasching-Varner, Reynolds, Albert, & Martin, 2014, p. TK).

Hagerman and Vivier's "I Don't Think He Knows About It/'He was Outraged': White Parents and White Boys Talk" offers its contrasting focus on how two White youth have formed different ideas about race, racism, and racial privilege from their families during childhood.

In Diaquoi's "Limited and Limitless: Preparing Black Boys for Colorblind Racism," the author argued that the true definition of "colorblind" today is that Whites are blind to the experiences of being a person who is Black or another person of color today, suggesting to me a strong need for ongoing intercultural dialogues in our schools, communities, civic organizations, and faith communities. Two such examples in Portland, Oregon, are monthly Race Talks, where individuals from diverse racial and ethnic groups have the opportunity to meet in mixed-race groups to dialogue on racial justice issues in the region and state in small groups following presentations by multiracial panels, and the recent dialogues begun this winter by members of the city's police bureau with students and community members, including Black community activists, held at high schools in the city's most diverse communities.

Abrams's "Talking to My White Sons About Trayvon Martin: The Privilege of Protection" poignantly reveals how she helped her son make sense of the racism that Jackie Robinson experienced in his baseball career as they watched together the film *42—The Jackie Robinson Story* and the surreal experience she had when about halfway through the film she checked Facebook and learned that Zimmerman had been found not guilty.

Saenz's "Fifty Years of the Deferment of the Dream for Racial Justice: From Hattie Carroll to Trayvon Martin" shows parallels between these two deaths fifty years apart that are striking and disturbing, as we continue to sleep through the civil rights revolution, to borrow a phrase from Alexander.

Rosario's "The Legal Education Gap: How a High School Legal Education Can Lay the Foundations for a Just Society" is among the most hopeful chapters in the book. In her closing section, "A Solution & a Call for More," she recounted how she was able to help her students in an alternative school in Chicago—mostly students of color from low-income families—deal with a variety of social and economic challenges and crises that they faced outside of school.

The disparities between Blacks and Whites in access to basic civil rights and to fair, unbiased opportunities and representation within our legal, economic, political, and educational systems remain a huge stain on our society. The authors suggested that we must first name these disparities in our past history and in our current society and communities in order to identify the cultural narratives that limit our becoming a just society for all individuals and groups. Learning about these narratives and how they affect other groups and individuals as well as ourselves in ways we often don't begin to understand requires earnest, ongoing dialogue across racial groups. Within these dialogues, we can envision together what we want our communities and society to be and then work together to address current inequities and injustices, holding our institutions and each other accountable for making the changes in law, policy, and ways of being together that would help us become the communities, states, schools, and society we wish to live in. Two examples of such efforts in my city of Portland come to mind: (a) Oregon's Partnership for Safety & Justice's recent legislative successes in working with victims and their advocates, formerly incarcerated individuals, district attorneys, law enforcement and public safety reformers, citizens from all political and civic affiliations, and our legislators to pass the Justice Reinvestment Act in 2013, a bill that would put resources saved from not building another prison into justice reinvestments at county levels, such as mental health services, addiction treatment, and postconviction counseling/mentoring in order to reduce recidivism rates; and (b) Multnomah County's Community-Juvenile Justice Programs, with the assistance of the Annie E. Casey Foundation, that provide alternatives to juvenile detention that have both community service and restorative justice features. At the national level, the Dignity in Schools Campaign is designed to unite those committed to replacing school cultures of zero tolerance, punishment, and exclusion with alternative approaches such as restorative practices, which are making well-documented differences in young lives through increases in school attendance

and graduation rates and lower juvenile detention and recidivism rates around the country through their efforts and activism.

What lessons have I taken from these writers that inform my civic work on racial justice? First, ongoing participation in interracial, intercultural dialogues is crucial, with a commitment to openness and respect as we identify and own our own biases, stereotypes, cultural narratives, and areas of ignorance. What we learn about ourselves will not always be comfortable, but the discomfort will enable us to build new bridges of understanding that are central to becoming an inclusive community, school, justice system, and society. Second, we need to identify and bring to scale what we find is working and dismantle what is not working, keeping our focus on the possibilities, conversations, and learning that lie ahead as we strive to bring about a more just and inclusive society through equitably negotiated and transparent goals and the allocation of human and fiscal resources for the changes we agree are needed in our communities, states, and nation.

I thank the editors and writers of this volume for offering us a unique and transformative journey for readers to take up the call to engage in intercultural dialogue, self-reflection, and collective activism so that we might hold ourselves and each other accountable to make critical changes in our institutions as we work together to create and sustain a society that will benefit *all* of our youth, adults, families, and communities. I hope this book will be read and discussed widely in multiracial/ethnic gatherings within educational, community, and civic groups, faith communities, and legislative bodies, and within our families as well. Such dialogues will need to be ongoing for years to come if we are to create together an equitable, racially just, and sustainable future of a very different design.

References

- Fasching-Varner, K. J., Reynolds, R. E., Albert, K. A., & Martin, L. L. (Eds). (2014). *Trayvon Martin, race, and American justice: Writing wrong*. Rotterdam, Netherlands: Sense Publishers.