Historicizing Fear

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Published by University Press of Colorado

Chunnu, Winsome M. and Travis D. Boyce.
Historicizing Fear: Ignorance, Vilification, and Othering.

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Defining the “Other”/Pathologizing Differences
George Stinney Jr. became the youngest person (at fourteen years old) executed in the United States in the twentieth century, by electric chair in Alcolu, South Carolina. He had been accused and convicted of brutally murdering two young white girls in a nearby meadow. Records of this case indicate that proceedings were questionable. The fact that Stinney was a black youth in the South suggests that he was at a disadvantage in a predominantly white justice system. All-white mobs demanded retaliation. Within three months of the girls’ murders, he was accused, tried by an all-white jury, convicted, and executed. Evidence was vague, witnesses were absent, and his “confession” (after an interrogation by white officers) was the primary argument incriminating him.¹ This case demonstrates a severe instance in which a black youth was seen as criminal, absent evidence. It typifies the historical stigmatization and normalization of young black men in a negative light. It is this view that directly influences dominant attitudes of fear and oppression that persist today.

A modern-day illustration was seen on February 26, 2012, on a rainy Sunday evening in central Florida. A seventeen-year-old black male, Trayvon Martin, was walking home through a gated community after purchasing an Arizona iced tea and a bag of Skittles from a local 7-Eleven store. During the walk home, Martin was followed by twenty-eight-year-old George Zimmerman, an armed, white, neighborhood-watch volunteer. Zimmerman viewed Martin as suspicious and (in Zimmerman’s words) “up to no good.” The resulting encounter between the two ended with Zimmerman fatally shooting Martin. Zimmerman’s story was that the
seventeen-year-old Martin had attacked him. Zimmerman was acquitted of murder on the premise of self-defense. (He was not acquitted by Florida’s Stand Your Ground law, which is commonly mis-cited as the reason.) This event sparked a national discussion regarding racial profiling and the killing of black men and was the genesis of the #BlackLivesMatter movement.

The murder of Trayvon also points to how race and gender intersect for black men in the United States. The logic Zimmerman used to pursue Martin draws on a long-standing public assumption of black male deviancy. In this sense, the fear of black masculinity is a socially constructed ideology that implies wrongdoing by black males (such as Trayvon Martin and countless others), resulting in their surveillance, discipline, and (in many cases) death.

This chapter shows how fear is part of society’s view of black masculinity. In particular, the chapter will reveal how the fear of black men is constructed and propagated through various social institutions (including the media and social policy). The chapter looks closely at the Trayvon Martin case, among other examples, to highlight how dominant ontologies are mapped onto the black male body. We describe how these ontologies are used to subjugate black men through particular forms of surveillance, discipline, marginalization, and exploitation. First, the social construction of black masculinities is described. Then the chapter goes further to examine how media representation, surveillance, and discipline policies all serve as powerful ideological and repressive institutions that reproduce the fear of black masculinities.

BLACK MASCULINITIES
An exploration of the history of fear of black men begins with the social construction of black masculinity. Historically, black men have been perceived and treated by whites as an inferior race, as if they were an un-evolved form of masculinity. Because both race and gender are socially constructed identities informed by and through relationships of power in a white, patriarchal, capitalist society, black masculinities have been largely interpreted in relationship to white, hegemonic masculinity. Thus black masculinities have largely been developed through xenophobia of the black male body. Ironically, black men are seen as both a threat and a commodity by the white, patriarchal, capitalist society. As such, black masculinities might be understood to be a collection of practices constructed through social anxiety and fear of black men. This fear is then mediated by the state through particular hegemonic, discursive, and repressive practices.2

For example, early theories on black masculinity (fueled by what is now known as racist and flawed science) described black men as intellectually and morally
inferior to white men. Black men were assumed to be uneducable yet physically superior or hyper-masculine, making them dangerous and needing to be controlled by white patriarchs. The overemphasis on the physicality of the black body and concomitant under-emphasis on intellectual capacities seems to serve the corporate interests of a white, capitalist class reliant on maintaining systems of worker exploitation (such as slavery, sharecropping, low-wage employment, and so forth).

A discourse of fear of black male physicality similarly exploits black male sexuality. White America’s fascination with black sexual practices equated black men’s presumed sexual prowess with animalistic desires. Black men were and continue to be viewed as hyper-sexual and sexually aggressive, lacking the capacity to control their sexual urges and conform to Victorian notions of middle-class sexual decency. White women in particular were assumed to be the ultimate sexual conquest of black men and warranted the need for white men to protect white racial and sexual purity. This was largely done through the regulation (e.g., miscegenation laws) and punishment (e.g., lynching) of the black body. The quest to regulate racial purity is likely part of the Stinney case. The black teen had apparently “confessed” to wanting to have sexual relations with the two white girls who had been murdered, though evidence did not demonstrate that the deceased had been sexually assaulted. His execution could be interpreted as white men protecting the white female body.

In this sense, in a white, patriarchal, capitalist regime, both black men and white women were seen as property of white men. In this regime, white women needed protection and black men needed regulation. One illustration is the well-known 1955 case of Emmett Till. Till, a fourteen-year-old boy visiting family in Money, Mississippi, was accused of breaking cultural mores by interacting with a white woman. Subsequently, the teen was brutally beaten and killed by the accuser’s husband and brother-in-law. Situated in a discourse of fear of miscegenation, as in Till’s case, black male sexuality is regulated to protect the property value of white women.

Popular conceptions and fear of black male sexuality are largely mediated by mass communications. The next section explains how popular media representations perpetuate a stigmatized construction of black masculinities.

POPULAR REPRESENTATION IN MEDIA

Popular representations of black men, particularly through mass media, have been influential in propagating fear of black masculinities. Black men—particularly men living in urban communities—are regularly depicted as violent, angry, prone to criminal behavior, and hyper-sexual. Although former president Barack Obama, the first black male president of the United States, is currently a habituated image of
black masculinity, the most commonly consumed images of black men in contemporary times are of the athlete, the gangster rapper, and the criminal. Each of these images is celebrated and appropriated while concomitantly loathed and feared. As John Hoberman explains, “The merger of the athlete, the gangster rapper, and the criminal into a single black male persona” has created a dominant black masculinity that supersedes other masculinities and confirms white fears. On the occasions where middle-class black men are represented, they often appear assimilated into dominant cultural norms, emasculated, or asexual, safe, and appeasing white fears. This situation has led to a somewhat bipolar representation of black masculinity, where black men are constructed as either “good” or “bad” depending on how much their behaviors either appease or create anxiety among gazing whites.

For instance, local and network news programming regularly associates black men with crime, making criminality the most common stereotype of black masculinity in the media. Black men are disproportionately portrayed in scowling mug shots or in handcuffs. In examining negative media messages about blacks, Lanier Frush Holt describes how media communications set a primer for racial perceptions that influence the general public. Priming is defined as the process by which certain aspects of an issue are made more salient by the media and, in turn, influence a person’s perception or understanding. Thus when media portrayals constantly show black men as participants in criminal activity, “this overexposure has the dual effect of causing many whites to conflate violence with being black and increasing the belief that committing crime is a natural tendency for blacks.” People with limited or minimal interactions with black men may draw upon what they infer from the media’s priming, which inherently invokes fear and distrust. The cognitive effect of racial priming on public perceptions contributes to how black males are monitored and judged based on whether their masculine behaviors confirm or contradict preconceived notions of black male deviancy. Furthermore, media-propagated racial stereotypes play a significant role in inducing and perpetuating viewers’ beliefs that black men are more likely than white men to commit a crime. If so, white people might reason, black men are thus deserving of differential racial profiling, convictions, sentencing, and even death.

The case of Trayvon Martin presents a complex example of media representation. The media started out with one narrative, but then moved to another. For instance, initial pictures of both Martin and George Zimmerman were polarizing. A photo provided by the Martin family pictured Trayvon as a young, innocent-looking teen, wearing a black Hollister T-shirt and smiling into the camera. This particular picture was taken roughly four years before Martin’s death. That photo of the teen was often presented alongside a mug shot of Zimmerman, taken roughly six years earlier when he had been arrested for assaulting an officer. (The charges
filed against Zimmerman for this incident were later dropped.) When shown side by side, the two photos constructed an initial narrative of an innocent child gunned down by a vigilante who “had it in for” black male youth. This visual story drew upon a long history of black male witchhunts at the hands of white male aggressors. The nature of Martin’s death was often compared to that of Emmett Till over half a century earlier. In the public’s eye, Martin’s innocence and Zimmerman’s guilt were initially presumed.

The narrative shifted as other images and reports of Martin surfaced. Photographs emerged showing him with gold fronts on his teeth, wearing pants that were sagged, and “flipping off” the camera. Such images countered the previous images of youthful innocence. The more recent Martin photos were placed alongside new images of Zimmerman wearing a suit and smiling. Reports of Martin’s disciplinary record in school, which included suspensions for being tardy, writing graffiti, and possessing remnants of marijuana, were used by media in conjunction with the new images to paint Martin as a “thug” with disciplinary issues.

Of course, teens of all racial backgrounds stylize their bodies and engage in self-representations of resistance in ways consistent with what they might see in the media. Youth today often wear saggy pants, have tattoos and piercings, and dress in Goth style. And it is not uncommon to find teens who have been suspended for non-violent offenses such as truancy or willful defiance (the latter a highly subjective and broadly defined infraction that might include rolling one’s eyes at a teacher or refusing to have a cell phone confiscated). Trayvon’s disciplinary record was hardly an indicator of a future criminal and more that of an average American high school teenager.

Nevertheless, media’s re-presentation of Martin as a “thug” and the downplaying of earlier images of him as innocent more closely mirror the dominant racial prime used by the media: the view of black men as deviant. There had been a shift in the narrative about both Zimmerman and Martin, where Zimmerman was seen less as a racist vigilante and more as a protector of private property holding the right to defend himself against a supposed black male attacker. Likewise, images of Martin’s masculine posturing were, for many, affirmation that Martin, like most black men, was prone to criminal behavior and thus deserving of harsh discipline—despite the fact that Martin’s posturing was but one of many ways he might have shown masculinity. Smith College researcher Ann Ferguson studied the ways young black youth are viewed by their teachers. Ferguson’s assertion about how black boys are perceived in school is equally applicable to Martin, in that even teens who pose no real threat can easily be relabeled as “troublemakers” if their masculine performances affirm preconceived racist notions of black male deviance.

Today, media offer up sensationalized, narrow representations of certain black male performances over others. Despite this fact, black masculinities are diverse
and complex, and in most cases they diverge from the dominant narrative presented through the media. To take no notice of black men’s uniqueness is to discount the freedom of black men to make their own race-gendered identity, including the way black boys and men may conceptualize manhood and perform different masculinities across time and space.21

Furthermore, negative and stereotypical representations of black masculinity are not reflective of the history of black men. One must take into consideration the hegemonic and structural practices that marginalize and oppress black males in particular ways.22 As mentioned, the public infatuation with certain black masculinities over others subjects the black male body to particular types of labor exploitation and commodification. Though the gender performances of black men are varied and diverse, the most commercial images in popular media are the thug, gangster, athlete, and criminal. Thus men who fit these identities (such as Lil Wayne and those in the movie *Training Day*) can generate more revenue than the black male scholar. In a capitalist economy, black men performing these essentialized masculine roles are both capital and labor, used as entertainment and marketing tools. Perhaps the successful labor exploitation of particular black masculinities is not only dependent on a general fear of black men but also simultaneously reproduces fear among viewers. This economically motivated and socially constructed fear of black men through popular media appears to be a hegemonic narrative that subjects the black male body to a particular set of material, ideological, and repressive tools of surveillance and discipline.

**SURVEILLANCE AND DISCIPLINE**

The fear of black men constructed through the media in part informs and is informed by the particular modes of surveillance and discipline black men face in the larger society. As Robert Entman and others have shown, the media—particularly national news broadcasts—is more likely to represent black men as criminals than as lawyers, police officers, or other positive professional images.23 The dilemma with these racial stereotypes is that while the labels narrowly frame the performances of black men, they are based, though rather uncritically, in the reality that black men are disproportionately represented in the criminal justice system. Though black males make up less than 10 percent of the national population, they are overrepresented in the judicial system, experiencing disproportionate arrests and conviction rates compared to their white male counterparts.24 Within their lifetimes, black men are seven times more likely to be arrested than their white counterparts.

The reality is that though black males are disproportionately represented in the criminal justice system relative to their overall national population, it is actually
whites who make up the majority of prison convicts. Thus it is more likely that a white male will commit a crime than that a black male will do so. Nevertheless, popular racial theories and frames of deviance are more persuasive than actual data in dominant discourse. Research has shown that whites regularly characterize black men as aggressive, deviant, and more prone than whites to violence and criminal behavior. Whites tend to associate street crime with black men, and whites assume that black males account for more crime than statistics actually indicate. To many people, the framing of black men in the media and the overestimation of black criminality justifies the surveillance and excessive discipline of black males.

**Racial Profiling**

As a surveillance technique, the practice of racial profiling by police officers plays on both the dominant narrative of deviance and the overestimation of black male criminality—a reflection of white anxiety and fear of black masculinities. Racial profiling is the use of race as a major factor in engaging in law enforcement activity with citizens. Thus in this practice, an individual’s perceived racial identity is the most salient reason for police-initiated action, more so than the actual behavior of the individual. Any black man in a public or private space at a given time (or whose behaviors are interpreted as “suspicious”) is subject to this particular type of surveillance.

Racial profiling disproportionately impacts black men more than other racial groups. The assumption that black men will commit the most crimes contributes to the disproportionate surveillance and encounters with law enforcement. For instance, stop-and-frisk practices in cities such as New York and Philadelphia empower law enforcement officer to target black males deemed suspicious. In addition, the notion of “driving while black” is the experience wherein black men are pulled over by police simply because they are black rather than for a substantive driving infraction.

The fear of black masculinities used in racial profiling extends to other forms of surveillance and discipline. Because racial profiling is used by police in pre-arrest contacts, the practice of profiling is an entrance point into the criminal justice system for many black men. The current trend is that one in three black men will be arrested during his lifetime. When convicted of a crime, black men will likely experience a longer sentence relative to their white counterparts. Considering the way black masculinity is constructed (through a discourse of violence and criminality), it appears that a fear of black men pervades the political ideologies, decision-making processes, and procedures of the law enforcement and criminal justice systems in ways that perpetuate higher conviction rates and longer sentences for black men.
The frequency and duration of black male discipline, in addition to racial profiling practices by law enforcement, mean that many black men will spend their lives under constant surveillance. Considering these realities, racial profiling exemplifies how race and gender intersect in particular ways for black men. Neither black women nor white men are racially profiled to the same degree as black men. Racial profiling is unique to black men in that they are profiled because they are both black and male and are criminalized in ways unique to the intersection of their race-gendered identity.

Of course, racial profiling is not unique to law enforcement. The public draws on dominant stereotypes in its observations of black men. Trayvon Martin, as a race-gendered teen navigating a gated community, was considered suspicious and out of place by George Zimmerman and was thus subject to surveillance. Black thieves had recently hit the area, proclaimed Zimmerman and his defense team. They offered this background fact consistently, both in court and during media sessions, as if to legitimize Zimmerman’s profiling. Thus, they claimed, when Zimmerman identified Martin, he did so assuming that Martin might be a burglar. As Zimmerman explained to the police dispatcher, “Hey, we’ve had some break-ins in my neighborhood, and there’s a real suspicious guy . . .” To a degree, Zimmerman may have been justified in his concern for neighborhood safety, given recent events in the community. However, the only commonalities Martin had with the previous culprits were his race and gender. Still, Zimmerman and his defense team regularly cited previous burglaries by black men as justification for Zimmerman viewing Martin suspiciously.

Being racially profiled led Martin to his unfortunate death. Subsequently, there was a seemingly poor investigation by law enforcement. Though Martin was killed less than a few hundred feet from his father’s fiancée’s house (where he was headed home), law enforcement officials never knocked on doors to see if anyone in the community could identify his body. Both Zimmerman and law enforcement apparently assumed that the teen did not belong in the community. Furthermore, Zimmerman’s forty-four-day–delayed arrest suggests that law enforcement uncritically took his claim of killing an unarmed black male out of self-defense as the only truth. It would appear that Martin was a victim of “walking while black” in a space where his race-gender evoked fear. His death was initially trivialized by law enforcement as signifying simply one less black criminal.

If Martin had been a black female or a white male, would the series of events have been different? Perhaps a teen of a different race or gender would not have been deemed suspicious or out of place, let alone under surveillance and aggressively confronted. The same question could be applied to George Stinney Jr.’s situation. Had he been white, would he have been the primary suspect, enduring unlawful due
process? The likely answer is no, but the question exemplifies the nature of historical racial profiling and its particular impact on black males today.

**Trayvon Martin as Racial Hoax**

Black men are particularly susceptible to the racial hoax, which is a false accusation of criminal activity. In the hoax, a person frames someone of another race as the perpetrator to deflect attention away from the actual criminal. A well-known case is the racial hoax committed by Susan Smith in 1994. Smith, who is white, reported that a black man had kidnapped her two sons by carjacking her vehicle. She said the boys were in the car, and the man drove away with them. It was later discovered that she had murdered her sons by making her car roll into a nearby lake, causing their deaths by drowning. In another example, in 1996, Robert Harris, who is white, claimed that he and his fiancée, Teresa McLeod, had been shot and robbed by a black man. Harris would later confess to having hired a hit man to shoot and rob McLeod.

Because a racial hoax is meant to make a black man at fault for a murder committed by a white person, the Martin case could be considered a hoax. Numerous people, including journalist Geraldo Rivera, proposed that Martin caused himself to be killed by wearing a hoodie and baggy pants. His masculinity was blamed as the reason for his death. If Martin hadn’t worn a hoodie and looked dangerous to a white observer, he might still be alive. This naive assumption seems to be the crux of racial hoaxes. In this case, the public fear of black men (even unarmed teenage boys) and the ease of black male criminalization in public discourse (“blame the black guy”) have implicated Martin in his own murder. This type of racial hoax can also be seen in the more recent killings of Jordan Davis, Jonathan Ferrell, and Michael Brown, among others, each gunned down because he was falsely accused of posing a threat to his killer.

These cases, as well as others (such as the Scottsboro Boys in 1931 and the Central Park Five in 1989), are only possible in a society in which particular black masculinities are feared. It is possible that the fear of black men accounts for many of the racial hoaxes and false accusations of black male criminality, especially considering that over half of exonerations involve wrongly accused black men.

In a white, patriarchal, capitalist society, black men are perceived as threats to the interests and property of the ruling class and thus are subject to particular forms of surveillance, discipline, and punishment. The ways black men are disciplined and punished are then reused as powerful forms of representation through various types of media. The media’s sensationalism of certain black male performances reaffirms a hegemonic regime of truth. But the media ignores that which constitutes reality for the majority of black men, which is inconsistent with
the dominant narrative on black masculinity. The reality is that most black men are not in prison. Many have experienced moderate to great success in life. Most are employed and principled, and most perform masculinities that contradict the meta-narrative of black male deviancy.37

CONCLUSION

Black masculinities have been historically constructed and contemporarily regulated through a social discourse of fear and anxiety. Through mass-media representations, surveillance, and discipline policies, black male sexuality and gender performances are stigmatized in ways that have material, economic, physical, social, and psychological implications for black males in the United States.

Certainly, each of these institutions informs the others. Media representation is reflective of and reproduces a dominant racial ontology that is mapped onto the black male body. For instance, nationwide television network news stations report on black crimes such as drug use almost twice as much as they report on similar white crimes, demonstrating that black deviancy is more “newsworthy” than white deviancy.38 These dominant ideologies and discourses about black male criminality are then used to inform public policy, including racial profiling and discipline practices. The outcome of disproportionate representation in the criminal justice system is then used to reaffirm a dominant racial ontology—which is then constructed, sold, and consumed through mass media. Though race and gender are socially constructed categories, fear plays a crucial role in the reproduction of black masculinities through particular discursive and structural practices.

NOTES

7. Myrdal, An American Dilemma; Harris, Boys, Boyz, Bois.
10. Hoberman, Darwin’s Athletes, xviii.
20. Ferguson, Bad Boys.
22. Ramaswamy, “Progressive Paths to Masculinity.”
35. Registry, Exonerations in 2013.

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