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Legacies of Fear

from **Rodney King's** beating to **Trayvon Martin's** death

Laurence Ralph and Kerry Chance

ON APRIL 29, 1992, the Los Angeles Riots began. Thousands of people stormed the streets following the verdict that acquitted four police officers who kicked, Tasered and beat black motorist, Rodney King, within an inch of his life. The incident, captured on a video recording lasting roughly ten minutes, was beamed out on television screens across the nation. In the intervening days, tensions ran high between Korean American shop owners and African American patrons. By the time the Riots (or the uprisings or rebellions, as some prefer to call the events) came to an end, property damages totaled nearly \$1 billion, fifty-three people had died, and more than 2,000 people were injured. The National Guard was deployed to occupy L.A., and U.S. Marines patrolled the streets enforcing a curfew.

Twenty-one years later, on July 13, 2013, millions of Americans watched their TV screens with baited breath, awaiting another verdict—the fate of a man, George Zimmerman, who had killed an unarmed teenager, Trayvon Martin. The basic facts of the case were not so different from the circumstances that led to Rodney King's beating, though Martin was nearly ten years younger than King was at the time of his accosting. And King survived his beating. Martin did not. Martin was on his way home when George Zimmerman began to follow him. Zimmerman told the police he had been following this “suspicious-looking” teenager. Martin knew he was being followed and told his friend, Rachel Jeantel, that the man might be some kind of sexual predator. Soon thereafter, Martin and Zimmerman confronted each other on the street. The confrontation ended when Zimmerman shot and killed Martin. This fact was not in dispute. During the trial, the critical question was whether or not there was sufficient evidence to suggest that Zimmerman acted in self-defense. The jury took the word of the confessed killer. Protests erupted across the country over the verdict. Activists, through banners, speeches, and song, pointed to a long history in the U.S. that has intertwined law-enforcement and race-based violence.

Producing Threat, Producing Injury

If we view Trayvon Martin's death through the prism of the Rodney King beatings and the subsequent acquittal of the police officers who pummeled him, perhaps we should not be surprised by the outcome. Just days into the trial, the writing seemed to be on the wall. Commentators on leading news networks began saying that the prosecution had presented a "weak" case. They had no theory of their own about how the encounter between Trayvon Martin and George Zimmerman

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took place. In all likelihood, the jury of six women, five of them white, would acquit the defendant. And they did.

Still, for many of us, the seeming inevitability of the verdict did not stem the communal grief expressed after the gravel sounded. Particularly for people who remember that desolate highway, which led

from Hollywood to the inner city streets of Compton, who recall the video footage taken along that highway, and who recall, further, how that footage inspired uprisings in L.A., Zimmerman's acquittal triggered the sometimes dormant, but always present, suspicion that black life doesn't mean much.

In the days after the verdict black Americans from Al Sharpton to Spike Lee to Oprah Winfrey to President Barack Obama himself, were compelled to speak publically about the many times when they were told that they didn't belong.

The President said: "There are very few African American men in this country who have not had the experience of being followed when they are shopping at a department store. That includes me." Those experiences, he went on to say, "inform how the African American community interprets what happened one night in Florida."

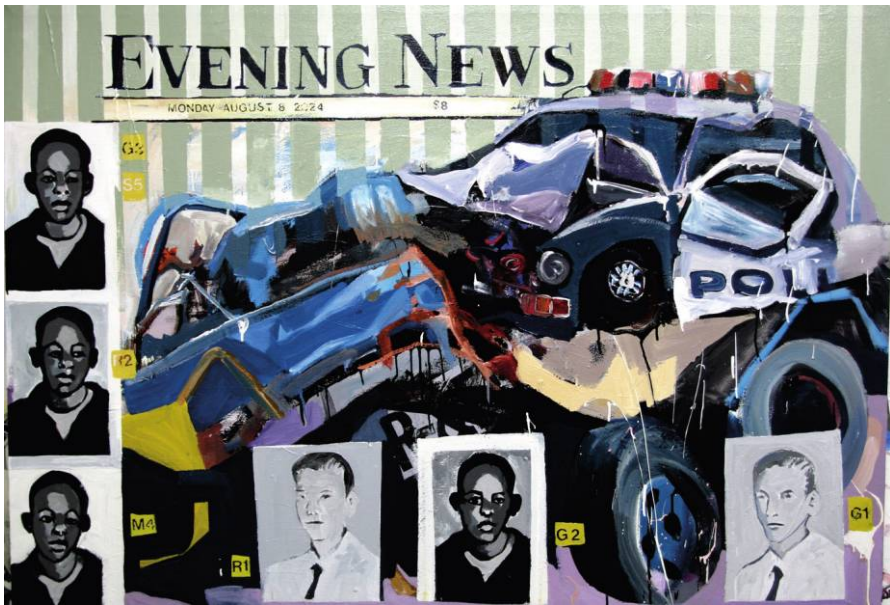
As the Zimmerman verdict made old wounds fresh, people of color who had been profiled and harassed were occasioned to think, alongside the President, about their many violent encounters with strangers. The moments that dotted their lives happened across decades, all over the United States, in malls and in streets and on sidewalks. But all these incidents were essentially the same: authority figures were telling them and the people whom they loved that they didn't really belong, that they were unwelcome visitors. They were reminded, finally, of an observation made again and again by canonical black writers, from W. E. B. Du Bois to Alice Walker, from James Baldwin to Toni Morrison, from Ralph Ellison to Richard Wright: that to be black, in America, is to perpetually feel foreign, and at the very same time, to recognize that you are feared.

Of the many comparisons that one could draw between Rodney King's beating and Trayvon Martin's demise in both cases, a palpable sense of endangerment surfaces. This sense of endangerment saturates the bloodstained highways and sidewalks upon which these events took place and then seeps in to contaminate our courtrooms where justice is supposed to be meted out. Historian Robin Kelley's insights about Zimmerman's trial could well apply to the Rodney King verdict. Shortly after the acquittal, he argued that the justice system eluded Trayvon Martin, not because the system *failed*, but because it worked. Our entire political and legal foundations were built on an ideology of settler colonialism, Kelley explains—an ideology in which the protection of white property rights was always paramount and always backed up by force. No surprise, then, that black and brown people who attempt to encroach on white territory have always been deemed threatening. "We were rendered property in slavery," Kelley writes, "and a threat to property in freedom."

Examining the long history of black bodily injury, as Kelley challenges us to do, allows us to see how the protection of white privilege and property is both enacted in the streets and enforced through the courts. Compare the footage of Rodney King being bludgeoned with nightsticks to the convenience store footage of Trayvon Martin, wearing a hoodie while purchasing candy and iced tea. Zimmerman's legal team used this footage to argue that Martin was, indeed, the "suspicious-looking" figure that Zimmerman presumed him to be. Both sets of footage served as evidence that the body being injured could still be a threat. This sleight of logic, Judith Butler has argued, relies for its success on the same production of endangerment or fear that Kelley alluded to when describing its foundations in slavery. Indeed, fear is what allowed six jurors in Sanford, Florida to listen to defense attorneys argue that the person who killed Trayvon Martin was himself the victim (the same courtesy the California jurors gave the policemen who beat Rodney King.)

To prove their point, in both cases, lawyers slowed down the respective video footage. Then they sped it up, flooding the jury with thousands of frames per second. They sought to show that Trayvon Martin, swaying back and forth in front of the register, could have been the drug user George Zimmerman determined him to be, thus warranting Zimmerman's decision to hunt him down. In a similar vein, the lawyers representing King's assailants used the camera footage to argue that King was continuing to fight back, that King was in fact the aggressor. But speeding up the film also created a different possibility: A slow

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Alleged. Oil on canvas. 40 × 58 inches. ©2011 George Hughes.

motion effect, in which cultural presuppositions about blacks and their place in society filled in the gaps between the frames, rendering the texture of the grainy footage culturally clear, even as the actual picture became blurred beyond recognition. That framing is what allowed both juries to invert their perception of danger, correcting the imbalance concerning what the film evidently showed (a teenager purchasing snacks or, on the other hand, plain old police brutality) and what they already believed: We should fear African Americans, and someone should protect us from that fear.

Lewis Gordon has termed this duality the simultaneous invisibility and hypervisibility of blackness. Trayvon Martin and Rodney King become invisible, their actual reality subsumed by an “illicit appearance.” The spotlight on black criminality (this “illicit appearance”) becomes so intense as to be blinding: hypervisibility leads to invisibility, “where to see a black [person] as such means there is nothing more to be known, seen, or learned.” And hence, the glaring stereotype of the angry man, who is at once criminalized and yet invisible, a contradiction in terms, is in “total control” of the situation, as one juror put it, even as he is beaten next to lifelessness or, in Trayvon Martin’s case, shot to death at close range.

The idea that blacks are always already threatening, prior to any video manipulation, enables the jury to inhabit multiple roles at once, according to Butler. They are witnesses; the lens of the video camera separates them from the site of danger, where the police (or self-appointed neighborhood watch members) protect them. At the same time, they *are* the police—endowed with responsibility, through the

power to convict, to serve and protect, to enforce the law and order. Additionally, they are the injured body, only a whitewashed version of that body. The blows King takes, the bullet that Trayvon takes, are the forms of violence they would suffer—that society would suffer, from their perspective—without the police’s protection. They identify with black vulnerability, in other words, but construe it as their own. Here, ‘self-defense’ gets distributed to the white police officers and to Zimmerman, to the jury and to the American public at large.

Geographies of Fear

In considering the production of ‘illicit appearance,’ we also ask to what extent imaginaries of white suburban enclaves, at the center of contemporary American geographies of fear and threat, have changed—or not—since the L.A. riots. Adam Weinstein, in a story on Sanford, FL, where Martin was killed, notes long-standing battles over these enclaves in the ‘community’ that Zimmerman sought to protect, using an example of the swimming pool. Quoting a local newspaper editor in 1990: “Sanford dug in its feet against change . . . It resisted integration, filling in public pools, rather than integrating them.” The swimming pool may be a productive, if unlikely, site to reclaim some small fragments of the recent history and politics of American racial segregation stripped away in trials of Trayvon Martin and Rodney King.

Twenty years after the Los Angeles riots and a year before Martin was shot, on June 17th, 2012, a forty-seven year-old King—whose body, broken by police, had become an unwilling icon of the Riots—was found lifeless in his Los Angeles swimming pool. News of his accidental death was followed by a continuous replay, on mainstream television, of the violent motorway video that made King a household name: a distinctively post-civil rights era King, who nonetheless announced the unfinished battles of an earlier period of social revolution. Among the most notable in the memorial coverage, archival interview footage on MSNBC showed King physically reenacting scenes from that fateful night of March 1, 1991, on the ground dodging blows from imaginary police officers. Holding true that history repeats itself the first time as tragedy and the second time as farce, the coverage, by also delving into King’s various addictions, his forays into celeb-reality, and struggles to find a footing in life after the

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Riots, once again rendered him both criminal, as the defense attorneys of the police attempted to portray him, and credulous, as the much parodied “Can’t we all just get along?” quotation did in its iterations in popular media.

Images of this dangerous body, and of harmless fallen celebrity, both past and present, then, were juxtaposed in the coverage with images of his death amidst the leafy American suburbs, with police now surrounding his backyard pool, where he regularly swam as therapy for past injuries. In effect, what this juxtaposition did, among

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other things, is again render King invisible—against the “hypervisibility” of his media-saturated figure—and thereby also the history and politics of the Riots, when a twenty-six year-old King found himself caught up in events beyond his making. It likewise erased what reflection today upon those events might suggest about existing fractures in urban America at a time when the election of President Obama has inspired much punditry and public speculation upon an ill-defined, ‘post-racial’ society. In none of the pronouncements made upon King’s death do we learn any more than we knew already, for instance, about

the routine police violence enacted against black citizens, which was and is well-known, well-documented, and congeals the material force of a long, gruesome genealogy, as Kelley suggests. In none of the coverage, do we learn, moreover, anything about the conditions that made possible and thinkable uprisings, brutality, and murder, or the forms of racial paranoia obscured through and by the rule of law.

The following two articles examine the roots of such racial paranoia, or rather, the logic of inverted fear at work over a two-decade span. Dai Sil Kim-Gilson’s 1993 film *Sa-I-Gu* (Korean for April 29), focuses on the death of a Korean teenager who was mistaken for a looter during the L.A. riots and shot dead. In an intimate interview with Harvard professor, Ju Yon Kim, the filmmaker expresses her determination to counter the media’s portrayal of poor people of color during the Riots who, she asserts, were “not depicted as human beings.” Dai Sil Kim-Gilson’s interview revolves around the following question: how does one contextualize historical change and simultaneously represent people who are forgotten, invisible, and feared? For her, witnessing “the sorrow of a mother who lost her only son to the riots” is akin to being doused with a bucket of ice water: one has no choice but to open her eyes to human suffering.

In the second article, legal scholar Patricia Williams compares King's beating to Martin's death, while sharing Dai Sil Kim-Gibson's desire to counter the media's portrayal of poor people of color during the Riots, and beyond. She reminds us that despite the seeming progress of the past twenty years, we live in a historical moment in which New York City's stop-and-frisk policies, Arizona's anti-immigration interrogations, and Florida's "stand your ground" laws are vigorously defended—laws which state that a person may justifiably use "deadly force" in self-defense when there is "reasonable" belief of a threat—laws which put the burden on families, like the Martins, to prove that their dead children were not justifiably menacing.

Taken together, these two articles speak with relentless force about how people of color are profiled and subjected to abuse (not only by the police, but by ordinary citizens) whether or not they have committed a crime. They offer a challenge to see the world differently, and an incitement to alter the way we think about race and crime—and how our collective fears paralyze us, preventing our society from flourishing. Through attentive and impassioned art and careful research Kim-Gibson and Williams urge us to consider how the bodies of the brutalized often serve as the locus for claims that they themselves are the source of violence, or the potential source of violence, and are, therefore, responsible for the violence they receive. This rigorous and retrospective examination, which also highlights the predicament of the present-day, is an experience we wish to share with all of *Transition's* readers. 🌐