

*“It Could Have Been Me”
Really? Early Morning Meditations on
Trayvon Martin’s Death*

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“IT COULD HAVE BEEN ME” was the headline that marked the comments offered by Dwayne Nash in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*.¹ Nash, identified by interviewer Stacey Patton as a “35-year-old black graduate student who is in his fourth year at Northwestern University’s black-studies program,” was interviewed in a café near the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, one of the leading repositories for scholarship and materials on and by peoples of African descent. Nash’s graduate work, we are told, focuses on issues of racial profiling in New York City’s local courts. Nash’s dress—as described by Patton—in every way codes within a continuum that is decidedly Manhattan chic: “pinstriped suit, a Burberry tie, a powder-blue shirt, and wing-tipped shoes.”

In the interview, Patton conveys Nash’s range of concerns about the vulnerabilities of contemporary black masculinity. Nash legitimately points to the disproportionate number of black and Hispanic men who are stopped by the NYPD, asserting that eighty-five percent of police stops in New York target blacks or Hispanics, and he points to the racialization of threat—“We [black men] are being automatically read as a threat, criminal, or suspicious at the very least.” Nash then goes on to say:

Instead of Trayvon Martin, it could have been me that was killed. I know my time is coming when I’m going to be surrounded by an

unbelievable abyss of fear. I pray that a gun barrel is not pointed to my face and that I am not shot and killed for making an innocent gesture or for being in the wrong place at the wrong time because of my skin color. And the wrong place could be in my own home. There is no right place for me.²

Trayvon Martin has rapidly become an “every(black)man”: from the constant repetition by young black men across the country that “it could have been me” to the President’s enunciation that if he had a son, “he would look like Trayvon,” and more recently, Martin’s mother’s soulful declaration: “Trayvon was our son, but Trayvon is your son.”³ These rhetorical gestures are strategically and politically important in that they keep the cause for justice for Trayvon Martin alive. Ms. Martin’s shift in tense from “was” to “is” certainly alerts us to this. Her words also rally the collective to the cause; they provoke fear and worry that moves us into action, and they produce empathy. The danger, however, as Saidiya Hartman reminds us in her text *Scenes of Subjection*, is that empathy is a precarious business.⁴ Empathy can prompt us to lose sight of what is substantively on the table. What matters is not that it *was* Trayvon, but rather, Trayvon matters because *it could have been me*.

Without intending or even thinking it necessary to dismiss this conflation (since I will return very briefly to why imagining oneself as Trayvon Martin remains politically significant), I think that there are some crucial points that we miss when we move too quickly to identify with, rather than to interrogate, this tragedy—for example, the slippery scale between the good and bad victim, the increasing militarization of our public space, and the insidious (and ongoing) racialization and classing of this militarization.

Arguments asserting Martin’s culpability in his own death have been shocking for many. The facts of this case are not yet clear (and, ultimately, one might say buried). But it is not my intent to argue for or against these culpability arguments because they are to all intents and purposes a red herring. I am fascinated, however, with how the idea of dress has been bandied around to argue for such culpability, and even more germane to my purposes here, I am interested in how, despite—and maybe because of—the ubiquitous presence of the hoodie, this item actually comes to mark Martin’s death as a very *specific* story rather than an *everyman* story.

To return to the interview by Patton, I was somewhat bemused that Nash did not own a hoodie. In the interview, Patton notes “Mr. Nash was making plans to purchase a hoodie for the Million Hoodie March.” In the animated world of my mind, I chuckled as I thought of the profound consternation that the hoodie would present to the Burberry tie. However, if clothes become a metonym, or at the very least an indicator of class, what does it say to us that the item that has been singled out as the object of vilification and resistance is the hoodie? African Americans will attest to the fact that hoods have always been dangerous sightings, but that aside, the progression of events that have placed the hoodie center stage are worth noting. In response to the police officer’s question “Did you see what he was wearing?” Trayvon Martin’s killer, George Zimmerman, responded: “Yeah, a dark hoodie, like a gray hoodie and he has [indistinguishable] jeans, or sweat pants and white tennis shoes... He’s here now and he’s just staring.”⁵

Following the shooting, Geraldo Rivera made a plea on March 23, 2012, on the Fox News show *Fox and Friends*: “I am urging the parents of black and Latino youngsters particularly to not let their children go out wearing hoodies. I think the hoodie is as much responsible for Trayvon Martin’s death as George Zimmerman was.”

This incited outrage that led to other stagings such the “Million Hoodie March” in cities across the country and the Miami Heat basketball team donning hoodies in an act of solidarity. Certainly a number of young men on my own campus are now dressed similarly (or maybe I notice them more now in their hoodies). The parallels here between Martin’s case and how rape victims are typically treated are uncanny: What was he wearing? Was he “suspiciously” (seductively) dressed? Is he a credible victim? How, then, do we make sense of the fact that he was suspended from high school for a “dime-bag” (we need to find out how many men she’s slept with before the rape)? These questions are marshaled to compromise the legitimacy of Martin’s status as victim, as they are designed to do with women who have been assaulted. We ought not to be in lockstep with such state-sanctioned suspicion. The question we must ask is not whether Martin was an “innocent victim,” but rather why has there been such work to produce him as such, as evidenced by the use of a picture

taken of him at a much younger age or our emphasis on the Skittles and the iced tea he was consuming on the night he was killed.

I am not highlighting these parallels between Martin and rape victims as a sleight of hand that masks my own desire to conflate identities. Their commonality is that they both represent embodiments that confound legal machineries that were never designed to work on behalf of or reflect the subjectivity of the marginal. Sara Ahmed is helpful here as she writes:

Law is *literally* a body in so far as it is *like* a body—involved in acts of consumption and expulsion. Through analogy, the desired (and impossible) integrity of the law becomes the desired (and impossible) integrity of the body. But whose body? ... For bodies are never simply and literally bodies: they are always inscribed with a system of value differentiation; they are gendered and racially marked; they have weight, height, age; they may be healthy or unhealthy; they may be able-bodied or disabled.⁶

It is the affront posed by and unrecognizability of differentiated bodies that generates the work required to make these bodies legitimate and credible victims. Representation, therefore, continues to be work that has to be *made to happen* on behalf of the unintelligible. This we must challenge. Nonetheless, let us return to the offending garment.

This is *not* a pipe/*is* a pipe.⁷ That Nash did not own a hoodie or that I only now see the many young men (both white and of color) on my predominantly white campus or in my primarily immigrant neighborhood who wear hoodies are both symptomatic of what is in play here—that the hoodie *is* and is *not* a hoodie. What then are the terms that prompt us to *see* and be *seen*? When does one become, to quote Mary Douglas, “matter out of place?” Douglas writes:

If we can abstract pathogenicity and hygiene from our notion of dirt, we are left with the old definition of dirt as matter out of place. This is a very suggestive approach. It implies two conditions: a set of ordered relations and a contravention of that order. Dirt then, is never a unique, isolated event. Where there is dirt there is a system. Dirt is the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter, in so far as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements.⁸

To locate the offense in a hoodie is a distraction; to ask when it marks one as out of place, when it prompts one to be seen as “dirt,” is not. What marks such classification? Who demarcates such spaces? Are they policed similarly? Were Nash to have turned up for his interview in a hoodie, would he have been deemed any less credible? I suspect not. Let us be clear, this is not a “wrong place and time” argument. I am fundamentally questioning what *produces* public space as the “wrong space” for our young people, specifically for young black men. And here I am deeply troubled by the militarization of public space.

There have been multiple manifestations of such militarization of public space. We can think, for example, of the November 8, 2011, pepper spraying of University of California, Davis, students while they peacefully “occupied” their campus as part of the Occupy movement. As I said to my students out of concern for the reification of the event and seeming shock that reverberated, the situation was insidious but not exceptional in its occurrence. It was no less evil in its manifestation than police dogs being unleashed to attack protestors in Birmingham now almost fifty years ago, or bullets barreling into protestors in Soweto only some thirty plus years ago. Unless we begin to tie these violences into the militarization of everyday public spaces, our conversation will be a constrained one. Not only is an intense militarization of our commons taking place, there has been an expansion of the geographies that have come in for militarized attention.

In the name of protecting the private realm, neighborhood watch organizations have increasingly militarized the public realm. Take Cynthia Enloe’s understanding of militarization that highlights “the step-by-step process by which something becomes *controlled by, dependent on, or derives its value from* the military as an institution or militaristic criteria”; then we should expect that militarization requires combatants, and where none exist, combatants will be conjured.⁹ Militarization will have its objects.

“He’s here now and he’s just staring . . . and now he’s just staring at me” (George Zimmerman’s 911 call). At the point at which imagined combatants face off, what do they see? What, to invoke Ahmed, is the “ontology of strangers?” In this ontology, these bodies are not only strange and, as such, should be stared at, but they are also expected to have “a nature,” a nature that signals itself even before the body arrives on the scene.¹⁰ Therefore, what happens to those

bodies when caught within a war zone? Trayvon Martin did not get caught in a residential community of Stanford. He was caught in a war zone, a war zone where a neighborhood watch organization had militarized the public space and where the rules of engagement were not determined by the domestic space but rather by the state.

If the public space is militarized and some bodies—in this ontology of the stranger—are readily seen as combatants, what then do we expect when such militarization is accompanied by a state-sanctioned “stand your ground” rule? If the very state machinery that has to be *made to work* to recognize marginalized subjectivities generously offers an endorsement of state violence, how can we not expect such “justice” to be dispensed in racialized and classed terms? And how can we not hold the state responsible for having participated in the militarization of our communities? The “stranger” to whom these processes are applied, the individual most vulnerable to being recognized as a threat, has a nature that is “already known” as it were, and this is a nature that needs to be contained, to be put back in its place.

The frequency with which black men have been subject to a violent “putting back in their place” within the public realm tells its own historical story. It is this history that easily renders Trayvon Martin an appropriate every(black)man. In its formal literary sense the idea of an “everyman” character is derived from the fifteenth century play *The Summoning of Everyman*, chronicling the pilgrimage of the allegorical character Everyman, essentially on a quest to respond to “what must a man do to be saved?”¹¹ This earlier discussion turns on the resolution of this moral dilemma. Lawrence Ryan notes: “For the play to be a success, the audience at the end not only must be exposed to but must comprehend the rather involved message revealed step by step through the experience of Everyman.”¹² Following on this, in our contemporary understanding, the idea of an everyman is used to convey processes of identification: we inhabit “his” circumstance, and as such, his turmoil and trauma become ours.

Throughout this discussion, I have aimed to focus not on the exposition but rather on the comprehension of “the involved message revealed step by step through the experience of Everyman.” In other words, I want us as readers and as thinkers to pause so that this

tragedy, if only for a suspended moment, could be about Trayvon Martin and *only* Trayvon Martin and the conditions that produced and sanctioned *his* death. The tragedy here is that many of these catalytic conditions exceed the moment in question. That many of us have been caught up in the naturalized suspicion that is now applied to an array of raced bodies in our post 9/11 realities is of course implicated here. But equally as important to Martin's case is the racialized and classed overpolicing of our schools that makes traces of marijuana in an empty bag grounds for suspension for some and a call to parents for others (so that their child may receive treatment). Such racialized and classed "discipline" can sometimes make the streets more desirable than school; yet this desire is fraught with vulnerability for the reasons I have offered here.

Despite my earlier cautions to resist glib assertions of "it could have been me," I maintain that the symbolic deployment of Trayvon as an every(black)man is both poignant and appropriate. To hold Martin as iconic and symptomatic of many others, as an every(black)man, allows the idea of Martin to live beyond his life. Drawing on Kara Keeling's discussion of the futurity of queer subjects, Martin as an icon moves us from a narrative that should only *be* about Martin, to one that prompts us think about what Martin *could be*.¹³ To remember Martin allows us to challenge the systems that limited his possibilities to be and, through future activism, to realize new possibilities of being for Trayvon.¹⁴

In moments of senseless deaths, one must cleave to community. Our multiple identifications with Martin have provided an opportunity for many communities to touch flesh and, in so doing, to reaffirm our humanity as black people. His death has prompted us to remember the ancestors who have died as they peacefully inhabited public space. Here, as I do with my own ancestors in moments of trial, I remember Emmett Till, James Byrd Jr., Amadou Diallo, Sakia Gunn, Roger Owensby Jr.,¹⁵ and the countless other black men and women against whom violence has been used to put them back "in their place." That we see these deaths as dis/continuous phenomena is more a testimony to the United States individualist ethos that makes it impossible to see any series of deaths as connected and related to our own humanity and vision for the kind of world

in which we wish to reside. Rabid individualism will always be antithetical to collective memory.

Our moral dilemma in this moment is not to pursue the facts of this case; these are mercurial, and in many ways, the state-sanctioned violence that gravely influenced/s these proceedings position what is legal in diametric opposition to what is moral. I encourage us, as Ahmed prompts, to resist the ontology of the stranger. In the encounters where we stare at each other, it is my hope that we can work at practices of recognition—practices that prompt us to reach beyond thoughts that foreclose and to embrace and enact any and all gestures that open up opportunities to learn anew about the designated Other.

What would practices of recognition entail, particularly in light of the systemic forces that indeed encourage us to misrecognize each other? I would argue that such practices, if considered as requiring both a systemic and individual response, might well be informed by an anthropological spirit of inquiry. I say this completely cognizant of the complicity that this disciplinary mode of inquiry has had in our historical misrecognition of peoples and worlds. This history notwithstanding, my point of departure is informed by the critique that has been offered by postcolonial feminist anthropologists such as Kamala Visweswaran and Mary John. John, for example, invites a form of “anthropology in reverse,” where we are pulled “toward the unfamiliar within [our] own everyday vicinities.”¹⁶ That we bring the gaze of critical inquiry to the home space is my point of departure and indivisible from what I have identified as a politics of recognition. We know that premised on US dominant epistemologies, Trayvon Martin was not “misrecognized.” Zimmerman responded as his historical and social stimuli taught him to respond to bodies that signify as Martin’s did. At both the systemic and individual level, a politics of recognition requires us to suspend how and what we think we *know*. This requires courage, courage that I do not always possess, and courage for which the United States has yet to find a language.

Martin was a man, not a boy. A black man was killed. In response, I suggest that our racial futures hinge on a politics of recognition that is driven by anthropological curiosities where “home” becomes a place to be unlearned. To collectively suspend our historical

imagination about “home” is by no means a homogenous practice, considering the stark variability by which such a space has been inhabited. This practice, however, can nonetheless be guided by similar questions—what are the historical knowledges produced about home and the variably constructed ideas of un/belonging, where and how are they disseminated, and to whose benefit? How do we resist the *need* for—or the imperative function of—knowledges that aim to position us in an oppositional relationship regarding home’s scarce resources? What work do we need to do politically and individually to generate a literacy that questions the production—and ossification—of *otherness* within the home space? In the midst of it all, how do we cultivate, socially and within our respective worlds, a spirit of *wonderment* about and a valuing of each other’s humanity? Each requires the other; change has to be systemic and must be infused with hope. Pessimism is easy.

We are not innocent actors, and a politics of recognition does not presume us to be. Our experience of “threat” in its multiple manifestations is a commodity by which many of us make our living (from thug to Homeland Security). The fixity by which we presume to know the actors within these respective domains is what I am calling into question here. The irony of what I am offering as a politics of recognition is that in order to recognize, we may actually have to suspend our confidence and belief that we know what we see. The difficulty with what I am proposing—and, again, the need for courage emerges—is that, in our striving toward a politics of recognition, the idea of “home” becomes (remains) a place where we have no guarantee of safety, a place where we may at times have to make peace with a sense of feeling unsafe (as African Americans have done for centuries, and now, many undocumented immigrants must do).

This is only part of this story, however. One of the many ironies of this event for me is that this tragedy occurred not too far away from a community clubhouse that stood on Retreat View. Any definition of “retreat” would have sufficed to diffuse this encounter between Zimmerman and Martin. In an era that only celebrates a politics of engagement, a politics that prompts us to stare at each other, we lose sight of the fact that there are indeed moments where, in order to preserve another’s humanity, we may need to walk away—to retreat. We may, in these moments of withdrawn seclusion

and as a form of activism, need to learn how to listen to and decode unfamiliar vernaculars of being, to meditate on and to contemplate the many ways in which our contemporary militarized public zones produce us as the very objects of militarization, for in this constellation we are all objects, differently positioned—to retreat.

As we retreat and as an act of redemption, I am reminded of Lucille Clifton's "listen children," an excerpt of which seems gravely appropriate here:

listen
 we have been ashamed
 hopeless tired mad
 but always
 all ways
 we loved us

we have always loved each other
 children all ways

pass it on ¹⁷

NOTES

1. Stacey Patton, "It Could Have Been Me: A Black-Studies Graduate Student on the Killing of Trayvon Martin," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, March 20, 2012, <http://chronicle.com/article/It-Could-Have-Been-Me-a/131271>.
2. Ibid.
3. See Krissah Thompson and Scott Wilson, "Obama on Trayvon Martin: 'If I had a son, he'd look like Trayvon,'" *Washington Post*, March 23, 2012, http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/obama-if-i-had-a-son-hed-look-like-trayvon/2012/03/23/gIQApKPPVS_story.html; and John Parkinson, "Trayvon Martin's Parents Visit Capitol Hill to Demand Justice in Son's Killing," *ABC News's The Note*, March 27, 2012, <http://abcnews.go.com/blogs/politics/2012/03/trayvon-martins-parents-visit-capitol-hill-to-demand-justice-in-sons-killing>, (accessed March 28, 2012.)
4. Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 19.

5. George Zimmerman's 911 call on February 26, 2012. See Frances Robles, "911 Tape Shows George Zimmerman Lamenting That the 'A-holes Always Get Away,'" *Miami Herald*, March 21, 2012, <http://www.miamiherald.com/2012/03/16/2697604/trayvon-martins-parents-criss.html>.
6. Sara Ahmed, *Differences That Matter: Feminist Theory and Postmodernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 27.
7. I am referencing René Magritte's painting *Ceci n'est pas une pipe* (1926), which prompts the viewer to challenge the relationship between language and the appearance of objects.
8. Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 35.
9. Cynthia Enloe, *Maneuvers: The International Politics of Militarizing Women's Lives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 281.
10. Sara Ahmed, *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 5.
11. Lawrence Ryan, "Doctrine and Dramatic Structure in Everyman," *Speculum* 32, no. 4 (1957): 723.
12. *Ibid.*, 725.
13. Kara Keeling, "Looking for M—Queer Temporality, Black Political Possibility, and Poetry from the Future" *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 15, no. 4 (2009): 579. I am indebted to one of my graduate students, Darius Bost, for pushing me to think of Martin in terms of a "body [that] signifies futurity and not 'death-bound' subjectivity." E-mail exchange April 1, 2012.
14. Keeling, "Looking for M."
15. While many of the names I have mentioned here garnered national attention, this was less so for Roger Owensby Jr., a young African American man whom the police misrecognized as a fugitive drug offender. Owensby died from injuries received due to excessive force used by the detaining officers. For additional information see *Estate of Owensby v. City of Cincinnati* (6th Cir. 2005), <http://caselaw.findlaw.com/us-6th-circuit/1469933.html> (accessed March 30, 2012).
16. Mary John, *Discrepant Dislocations: Feminism, Theory and Postcolonial Histories* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 118.
17. Lucille Clifton, "listen children," in her *Good Woman: Poems and a Memoir (1969–1980)* (Brockport, NY: BOA Editions Limited, 1987).