Introduction

Race, Criminal Justice, and the Death of Trayvon Martin

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On Sunday, February 26, 2012, George Zimmerman, a neighborhood watch volunteer in a gated Sanford, Florida, community, called the police to report a suspicious person walking in his neighborhood. Mr. Zimmerman, a twenty-eight-year-old man of mixed Hispanic ethnicity, was instructed by the dispatcher not to approach the person in question. Mr. Zimmerman disregarded those instructions, engaged in an altercation with the individual, and then fatally shot and killed Trayvon Martin, a seventeen-year-old unarmed African American teenager. Martin had been walking back to his father’s house after buying snacks at a local convenience store.

Zimmerman told the Sanford police that he killed Martin in self-defense. He was taken into custody but was soon released, and no charges were immediately filed. In an effort to spur an investigation and arrest, Martin’s parents launched an online petition that eventually garnered over two million signatures. Stories about Martin’s death soon appeared on national and social media and prompted demonstrations and rallies across the country. Participants wearing hoodies (as Martin was the night he died) and carrying placards with the phrase “I am Trayvon Martin” called for Zimmerman’s arrest. Attention to the case was so prominent that even President Barack Obama commented, telling reporters, “If I had a son, he’d look like Trayvon.” Within several days, the U.S. Department of Justice and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) announced investigations into the shooting, the Sanford police chief stepped down amid controversy over the department’s handling of the shooting, and a special prosecutor was appointed. On April 11, 2012, forty-three days after Trayvon Martin was killed, Zimmerman
was arrested and charged with second-degree murder. His trial began on June 10, 2013, and on July 13, 2013, George Zimmerman was acquitted of all charges by a Florida jury of six women. Weeks of public outcry and protests followed the announcement of the verdict.

The killing of Trayvon Martin and the subsequent trial of George Zimmerman for his murder sparked an intense national debate about race and criminal justice in America. High-profile criminal cases such as the murder of Trayvon Martin both shape and reflect the public’s views about offenders, the criminal process, and justice more generally. These cases also provide a window into how our criminal justice system operates, and raise important questions about whether justice is administered fairly and effectively. This particular case raised issues at the intersection of race, ethnicity, crime, and justice that have a long history in our country, and which remain salient today.

This volume is composed of twelve chapters that use the Martin/Zimmerman case as a foundation to examine the racialization of justice in contemporary society. Authors were asked to address the causes and consequences of Martin’s death and Zimmerman’s acquittal in order to highlight the larger social, political, and legal processes that influence both the administration of justice and perceptions of its legitimacy in the United States. Reflecting upon this high-profile case, the authors in this volume explore the broader issues associated with race, ethnicity, crime, and justice that are at the heart of the American justice system.

The book is divided into three topical areas. Chapters in the first section (“Who Is in Danger?”) focus on the role of race, ethnicity, and gender in shaping perceptions of criminality and the views of participants in the criminal process. Jacinta Gau and Kareem Jordan argue that George Zimmerman’s targeting of Trayvon Martin reflects pervasive stereotypes about blacks’ criminality and discuss how his actions are “legitimized” by police activity that promotes the extra scrutiny of African Americans. Kevin Drakulich and Laura Siller examine how race directly and indirectly shapes public perceptions of crime and criminals, with an emphasis on implicit racial bias. In an adaptation from his book Punished: Policing the Lives of Black and Latino Boys, Victor Rios provides insight into the multiple ways that surveillance of and assumptions about the dangerousness of young men of color decrease community security and create social distance between police and
minority communities. Moreover, he argues, the symbols of crime and dangerousness that are often attributed to young men of color foster fear, which may give rise to situations such as Zimmerman’s deadly pursuit of Trayvon Martin. In the final chapter in this section, Toya Like, Lori Sexton, and Savannah Porter compare the Trayvon Martin case to the murder of Gwen Araujo, a transgendered teenager who was killed in Newark, California, in 2002. They highlight how the intersections of race, ethnicity, class, and gender influence perceptions of others as threatening or dangerous.

The second section of the volume (“Where Do You Stand?”) examines the role of race in the development of Stand Your Ground laws, in criminal investigations, and in court processes. Katheryn Russell-Brown explores the evolution of Stand Your Ground laws in Florida and how such laws place perceived threats of harm above human life. David Harris examines how the racialization of policing and employment of Stand Your Ground defenses negatively affect criminal investigations by leading officers to focus on the wrong people and thereby misallocate police resources. In light of arguments that race played a role in the Zimmerman verdict, Amy Farrell, Patricia Y. Warren, Devon Johnson, Jordyn Rosario, and Daniel Givelber explore how the racial and ethnic backgrounds of defendants and jurors influence judges’ perceptions about the accuracy of acquittals in routine criminal trials. The final chapter in this section, written by Bryan Sykes, Alex Piquero, Jason Gioviano, and Nicolas Pittman, examines how perceptions of neighborhood safety are related to experiences of discrimination, which might provide a contextual frame for the encounter between Zimmerman and Martin.

In the third section of the book (“Which Voices Count?”), authors address public opinion, political responses, and media accounts of the Martin/Zimmerman case. Delores Jones-Brown and Henry Fradella argue that the combined influences of race, class, and gender influence the sociolegal environment in which Trayvon Martin died and George Zimmerman was tried and acquitted. The authors further analyze the divergent social views around the justifiability of Trayvon Martin’s death, and the legal validity of Zimmerman’s prosecution. For Isaac Unah and Valerie Wright, responses to the Zimmerman trial symbolize long-standing differences among whites, blacks, and Hispanics in their attitudes toward the criminal justice system and perceptions of its
legitimacy. Chenelle Jones and Mia Ortiz explore public reactions to the Zimmerman verdict, with a particular emphasis on the role of social media and social protests in organizing calls for federal involvement in the case. This section closes with a chapter by Heather Washington and Valerie Wright where they examine media accounts of young homicide victims. The authors find significant race and gender differences in how these victims are characterized and in the amount of media coverage they receive.

Ultimately, the chapters in this volume provide a scholarly exploration of race, ethnicity, crime, and justice. This approach complements and adds evidence to the discussions about race and justice that occur on news broadcasts, across social media, and in everyday life. To be sure, the debates about the role of race in the administration of justice that emerged in the wake of Trayvon Martin’s death and George Zimmerman’s acquittal have a long history in this country. And, unfortunately, they likely have a long future. As we compile this edited collection three years after Trayvon Martin’s death, high-profile incidents in places like Ferguson, Missouri, Staten Island, New York, and Baltimore, Maryland, have prompted groups across the United States to hold near-daily protests expressing concern that our society does not value black lives, and that justice is too often elusive for people of color. The chapters in this volume provide context for understanding the social, political, and legal processes that contribute to these views, and help explain why so many in our society question the legitimacy of our system of justice. By carefully examining and presenting the social scientific evidence, the scholars in this volume provide a critical perspective at an important historical moment.