

5

Trayvon Martin, Mike Brown, and Creative Productivity

THE PUBLICATION OF *Between the World and Me* on July 14, 2015, catapulted Ta-Nehisi Coates into the realm of nationally renowned author. He had been increasingly gaining public notice since the publication of his *Atlantic* articles “Fear of a Black President” (2012) and “The Case for Reparations” (2014). The publication of *Between the World and Me*, though, ensured him national and international acclaim as a writer and cultural figure. The book appeared on the *New York Times* best-seller list on August 2 and remained there for sixty-five weeks. More than one hundred reviewers and commentators published assessments of *Between the World and Me*, which was awarded the National Book Award for Nonfiction, and Coates enjoyed one of the most remarkable receptions a black author had gained in the history of African American writing.¹

The extraordinary acclaim that Coates received based on his relatively short book overshadowed his massive corpus of online writings. There are available systems—book reviews, college courses, common reading programs, and prestigious awards—for studying, discussing, and elevating books such as Michelle Alexander’s *The New Jim Crow*, Coates’s *Between the World and Me*, and Colson Whitehead’s *The Underground Railroad*. Those

systems far outmatch the possibilities for appraising comparatively succinct, concentrated compositions like blog entries and news articles. Yet those short compositions serve indispensable roles in raising collective consciousness about current events. In particular, our understanding of the shooting deaths of Trayvon Martin in 2012 and Mike Brown in 2014 owes special debts to the creative productivity of Coates's blogging and Trymaine Lee's reporting.

African Americans have actively written about the killing of black boys and men for more than a century now. Beginning in the late nineteenth century through the first decades of the twentieth century, Charles W. Chesnutt, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, Frances E. W. Harper, Paul Laurence Dunbar, W. E. B. Du Bois, Richard Wright, and innumerable other writers published news articles, essays, short stories, and poems about lynching.² Poets have been especially persistent on the topic of violence against black boys and men. The most recurring muse for such violence has been Emmett Till, the fourteen-year-old black boy murdered by white men in 1955. Till's regular appearances in verse, fiction, and nonfiction have persisted for more than six decades now.³ Contemporary situations involving racial violence against innocent black boys provoke us so much in part because of our strong communal cultural memories and historical knowledge about the brutality and lack of justice involving Till.

Today, a massive amount of writing, primarily newspaper articles, focuses on the fatal violence involving black boys and men. Despite the magnitude of that writing, families of African American victims justifiably feel that the coverage of their loved ones received has been woefully inadequate. Journalist Jill Leovy has explained that "the raw agony" that homicide has brought on thousands of black people "was mostly invisible. The consequences were only superficially discussed, the costs seldom tallied." And Leovy should know. In 2006 she launched the "Homicide Report" on the *Los Angeles Times* website with a goal of documenting every homicide in the county. In the process, she reported on approximately one thousand homicides.⁴

Unfortunately, the total numbers of slain black men is so large that reporters and other writers cannot keep up. Indeed, in 2017 in the United States, 6,789 black men were killed, which constituted 86% of the total number of black homicides. In that same year, black men represented 45% of the total number of all homicides in the US, a number that is

particularly distressing when you consider that we account for only 6% of the overall population.⁵ The sheer quantity of black male homicide victims as well as the perception that the victims and killers are primarily bad men (i.e., gang members or drug dealers) contributes to the silences surrounding the fatalities. Relatively few writers express concerted interest in mourning the losses or advocating the causes of murdered young men who were alleged willing participants in criminal activities. Furthermore, difficulties and restrictions against identifying murder suspects in black communities mean that information and narratives about black boys and men are relegated to the underground, off the radar for the media and on the official records. Publishers, writers, and audiences are typically captivated by unusual or controversial situations, such as those cases where racial injustice is blatant. The horrifying narrative of an overzealous neighborhood watchman killing a black boy carrying skittles and iced tea in a gated community, for instance, entices and inflames.

A range of writers published compositions about Martin's death. Dozens of journalists and poets wrote on the topic.⁶ Few writers at such far-reaching venues, however, were as prolific on the subject, so early, as Lee and Coates. The timeliness, pace, venues, and accessibility of their writings contributed to the nature and reach of their creative productivity. Their writings about Martin and then Lee's subsequent writings on Mike Brown demonstrate the significance of ample, timely compositions concentrating on the perilous plights of individual black boys. Examinations of the compositions of black writers that take creative productivity into account assist in explaining why some topics and subjects generate so many responses from audiences. In addition, a focus on creative productivity illuminates aspects of works by black writers that might otherwise be overlooked or downplayed.

Trymaine Lee's Relentless Pre-Black Lives Matter Reporting

More than a year before the circulation of "Black Lives Matter" as a rallying cry in 2013, Lee produced a series of news articles that would serve as invaluable evidence for public awareness about injustices committed against African Americans. Lee was relentless in his reporting. In less than

a month he published nearly two dozen articles about Trayvon Martin and George Zimmerman. According to Dean Keith Simonton, a specialist on creative productivity, “The norm is for the creators who produce the most works to also produce the most masterworks.”⁷ The quantity and availability of Lee’s reporting were vital to him producing foundational accounts, if not masterworks, in the capacious coverage on Martin. In other words, Lee’s creative productivity allowed him to produce essential works in the domain that would become known as Black Lives Matter.

Lee began his professional career in 2003 as a police and crime reporter at the *Philadelphia Tribune*, the oldest African American newspaper in the country.⁸ Later, he was a reporter for the *Trentonian* in Trenton, New Jersey, and then the *Times-Picayune* in New Orleans. In 2006 Lee was part of the team of journalists working for the *Times-Picayune* that won a Pulitzer Prize for their coverage on Hurricane Katrina. In the same year Lee began working for the *New York Times*, where over the course of four years he took on a number of assignments for the paper, including the Harlem beat, the Brooklyn beat, and the state legislature in Albany. In early 2011 the *Times* and Lee “parted ways after the *Times* opted not to promote me from intermediate reporter status.”⁹

Meanwhile, AOL had acquired the *Huffington Post*. Arianna Huffington became the president and editor in chief of AOL’s media properties, and in the process of expanding their journalism team, the *Huffington Post* hired Lee as a senior reporter.¹⁰ In an interview with veteran journalist Richard Prince, Lee was optimistic about the promise of the new position: “Now, I have the opportunity to do high impact journalism on exciting new platforms for a very dynamic, forward-thinking, smartly-run organization.”¹¹ That was March 2011. A year later Lee was writing about the case of a teenage black boy who was killed in Sanford, Florida.

Lee’s previous experiences as a reporter, including his coverage of violent fatalities, had primed him for writing about Martin. Lee had spent years covering black male homicide. “Too many times to count,” he wrote reflecting on his early years as a reporter arriving at a crime scene, “I’d find a young black man my age or younger dead with a halo of blood or brain matter splashed on the pavement.” He developed his skills meeting with and interviewing family members of victims.¹² While his coverage of appalling injuries and killings was admirable, his status as a beat reporter meant that his contributions went largely unrecognized in a broad domain on

violent crime, primarily involving black boys and men, appearing in newspapers across the country. As a senior reporter for a national publication like the *Huffington Post*, however, Lee's writing could garner a much larger readership. His writings would receive privileged positioning on the website, and he would have the resources to travel and stay in distant places for prolonged periods of time. A year into his new position, a tragic case gave him the opportunity to put his superb journalistic skill set to the test.

On February 26, 2012, Martin was visiting his father and stepmother in a gated community in Sanford, Florida. While watching the NBA all-star game, Martin decided to make a snack run. He went to a store and bought skittles and iced tea. On his return home, a neighborhood watchman named George Zimmerman began to follow Martin, assuming that the teenager was trespassing and scouting the neighborhood in order to commit a burglary or other crime. He called 911 to report that a suspicious person in a hoodie was roaming around the community. Zimmerman continued to follow Martin, and eventually the two had a physical confrontation. At some point during their fight, Zimmerman fatally shot Martin in the chest.¹³

There was relatively little media coverage on Martin in the immediate aftermath of his killing on February 26. Gun violence, unfortunately, occurs with enough regularity in this country that the shooting of Martin would have been just another one of the thousands of annual gun-related homicides. Martin's family, like other families, was certain that a grave injustice had taken place. Unlike most of them though, Martin's family had the wherewithal and financial resources to make the consequential decision of retaining the legal services of a media-savvy lawyer, Benjamin Crump, who in turn began to lobby reporters to publicize the case. Martin had been falsely viewed as suspicious because he was a black boy in a white neighborhood. In this case, Crump informed one reporter, race was "the 600-pound elephant in the room."¹⁴ Crump continued to make his appeals far and wide for journalists to raise awareness about what happened in Florida. Among those who responded was Trymaine Lee.

Lee's first article, "Trayvon Martin's Family Calls for Arrest of Man Who Police Say Confessed to Shooting," was published on the *Huffington Post Black Voices* site on March 8. The opening of Lee's article identified the main figures in the drama and highlighted the presence of injustice. Martin was identified as "an unarmed African-American teenager" who was

shot and killed, while “watch captain, George Zimmerman—a 28-year-old who has admitted to police that he shot the young man—still walks free. And Martin’s family is pleading for answers and demanding justice.” Lee included additional details that highlighted the unique nature of the situation. “At this point there are more questions than answers in the young man’s death,” wrote Lee. “But this much is known: Martin was packing little more than a bag of candy and a canned iced tea on the night he was killed.”¹⁵ The early presentation of unanswered questions involving the murder of an unarmed black teenager indicated that Lee would need to pursue more investigations in order to explain what happened. Over the course of the next month, Lee published a story on the Martin case almost every other day.

Lee’s writing amounts to a wide-ranging elaboration on the fatal confrontation between Martin and Zimmerman; background on the teenager and the neighborhood watchman and his group; the immediate aftermath of the February 26 confrontation and shooting; the questionable inaction of Sanford police officers; and comments from Crump, Martin’s family, and others. Lee’s second article in the Martin coverage, published on March 9, points out that Zimmerman had been arrested in 2005 “on charges of resisting arrest with violence and battery on a law enforcement officer.”¹⁶ The story cast doubts on assertions from Sanford police officers that the delay in arresting Zimmerman was because of his spotless past record. Lee’s next article, “George Zimmerman Neighbors Complained about Aggressive Tactics before Trayvon Martin Killing,” extends the argument that the neighborhood watchman had a reputation of disturbing behavior of which local police officers had been apprised.¹⁷ At the time Lee and other outlets were still referring to Zimmerman as white. Only later would journalists revise the description: some referred to him as a “white Hispanic,” and some labeled him simply “Hispanic.” The initial portrayals of Zimmerman as a white man who killed a black boy, no doubt intensified perceptions that his ability to avoid arrest was predicated on racism.

The focus on Zimmerman was just one aspect of Lee’s reporting. He also wrote about the transfer of the case from local investigators to the state attorney’s office; the history of racial tensions in Sanford; the release of the 911 call that featured the sound of the deadly gunshot from Zimmerman; the trauma of a thirteen-year-old witness; the ascendant activism in response to the case; Martin’s final telephone conversation with a friend

before he was killed; the grief of Martin's mother; the city commission's 'no confidence' vote regarding Sanford police chief Bill Lee Jr.'s handling of the investigation; and considerations of Stand Your Ground laws.

Trymaine Lee's March coverage on the Trayvon Martin shooting published on the *Huffington Post Black Voices* site amounted to twenty-two stories from March 8 to March 30 (see appendix). Lee published those articles within three weeks of his initial report on the case. He continued covering the story well into July. By late March he was one of dozens of journalists reporting on the shooting that left Martin dead, and in an interview in April reflecting on his work, he said he thought that "my early coverage definitely helped light the fire" that brought raised awareness about the initial incident.¹⁸

What had first inspired Lee to take on the Martin story, though most national news outlets had declined to do so? Well, Lee understood when reports first mentioned Martin's death that his readers at *Black Voices* would want to learn more. "It's the kind of story that had all the pieces there," Lee informed Tracie Powell in an interview. "It has race issues, social justice issues, gun and gun violence issues."¹⁹ Lee's awareness of the topics that resonated among African American audiences was integral to the stories he pursued. In the case of the Martin shooting, Lee's inspiration and motivating forces were multifaceted, and they directed him to dedicate his time and energy to covering Martin's story.

In retrospect, Lee's creative productivity in his coverage of the Martin shooting was quite phenomenal. He generated considerable content in a relatively short time. He was following leads, and in the process he interviewed more than forty people with direct ties to Martin and Zimmerman. Lee's articles referenced a range of commentators, elected officials, and well-known black people, including Barack Obama, Spike Lee, Gabrielle Union, and others. Lee was effectively creating a concentrated cultural catalog on Martin and Zimmerman, linking them to a variety of historical contexts or domains.

Lee's writings prompted other news organizations and journalists to report on the shooting. His articles were read, shared, and commented on by thousands of readers. The intense, growing interest in the case fueled Lee's overall output. Increased demand and page-views for articles on Martin signaled the value of the case to the *Huffington Post* and other news outlets. Lee was receiving support from his employer and encouragement from

readers to pursue even more reporting. There was apparently a relationship between Lee's relentless productivity and the interests of the field.

On top of his creative output, Lee's detailed reporting is noteworthy, as well as the journalist's ability to present firsthand accounts from residents of the neighborhood where the shooting took place. In one article Lee interviewed a thirteen-year-old boy who was within twenty yards of where Martin was killed. The boy told Lee that he initially had approached when he heard someone screaming (presumably during the struggle between Martin and Zimmerman), but that he briefly had turned away to retrieve his dog, which had gotten away from its leash. "Then I heard a loud sound and then the screaming stopped," the boy told Lee. The thirteen-year-old was disturbed that Zimmerman had not been arrested. Moreover, the boy was clearly traumatized by what he witnessed, as Lee reported: "The screams rattle around in his daydreams, so loud at night that sleep hasn't come easily."²⁰ That article, along with additional ones that concentrated on the emotional toll of the Martin shooting, made Lee's coverage particularly gripping and unique.

According to FBI data, there were 5,416 and 5,538 black male homicide victims in 2011 and 2012, respectively.²¹ Aside from news reports announcing such deaths, there was hardly any coverage on those victims and their grieving loved ones. Jill Leovy has explained that the viewpoints of family members and those who care about black homicide victims "are under-represented in our national debates over criminal justice."²² We rarely encounter extended treatments on the trauma of witnesses or the pain of families weeks and months after losing a father, son, brother, or friend to a violent death. The Martin shooting represents one of the relatively few instances in which national news organizations devoted sizable resources and continuous coverage to a homicide involving a black male. More than just a contributor to the conversation on Martin, Lee was instrumental in transforming an incident that initially received only local reporting into a national story with far-reaching implications. Lee's early and persistent productivity made it possible for him to make significant and visible additions to the conversation on Martin, Zimmerman, and injustices committed against black boys.

Lee's productivity rested on his prior experience reporting on shootings, his abilities securing interviews with a variety of subjects, and his capacity to produce story after story day after day. His position as a senior

reporter for *Huffington Post Black Voices* substantiated his overall output. He was no longer confined to a specific beat and limited set of areas as he had been when he was a reporter for the *New York Times*. By contrast, with the *Huffington Post*, he noted in an interview with Powell, “I cover issues and stories that impact the black community period, from politics to culture to crime and breaking news. My experience is different here because if there is something happening in Florida, well I’m on a flight and headed to Florida. I couldn’t necessarily do that in my capacity at the *New York Times*.” Although he wrote for *Huffington Post Black Voices*, Powell explained why Lee’s work could still reach broad audiences: “With *Huffington Post*’s search engine optimization tools, his reporting could also appear on the politics, business or front pages, which allows Lee and his stories to get more exposure to more people who aren’t black.”²³ In an April 2012 interview with Lindsay Beyerstein, when Lee is asked what the most popular article in his series on Martin has been, he identifies a piece about a police surveillance video showing Zimmerman with relatively few bruises hours after his confrontation with Martin. “To date,” Lee points out, “the story has generated more than 40,770 comments, 12,300 shares on Facebook and nearly 43,000 likes on Facebook.”²⁴ Evidently, technology and social media, not just reporting and writing skills, are central to Lee’s capabilities of reaching large readerships.

Along with Coates at the *Atlantic* and Charles M. Blow at the *New York Times*, Lee was one of the three writers at national publications leading the way on Martin coverage. All three of those writers are black men, notes Powell, and they are “credited with pushing the story of the controversial shooting death of Trayvon Martin into the mainstream.”²⁵ Coates and Blow already had long-term experience writing about race and social justice issues, so, like Lee, they were primed to write about Martin with a sense of historical perspective on the situation. Blow’s March 16 article “The Curious Case of Trayvon Martin” opens with a heartbreaking recounting of how Sybrina Fulton first learned of her son’s death in a phone call from Tracy Martin, the boy’s father. Blow goes on to describe what was known concerning the altercation and shooting, and he points out that “this case has reignited a furor about vigilante justice, racial-profiling and equitable treatment under the law, and it has stirred the pot of racial strife.” Blow closes by referencing a statement from the same thirteen-year-old witness that Lee had interviewed. In a video published by the *Orlando Sentinel*,

the witness notes that Martin had become a suspect because “sometimes people get stereotyped, and I fit into the stereotype as the person who got shot.” Responding to the statement, Blow concludes, “And that is the burden of black boys, and this case can either ease or exacerbate it.”²⁶

Blow, Lee, and Coates were soon joined by a large chorus of journalists, commentators, and activists who covered Martin’s shooting and the apparent unjust system that made it possible for Zimmerman to initially avoid charges. Lee’s reporting became part of the expanding domain on Trayvon Martin. That domain was part of even larger, historical domains focusing on innocent black males as criminals, systemic violence against black boys, and racial injustice in America. In his article “Emmett Till in Sanford,” published in the *New Yorker*, William Finnegan, like other commentators, highlighted connections between Till, Martin, and other black boy victims. “With this breadth and level of public attention and outrage,” writes Finnegan, “it is becoming possible to imagine the death of Trayvon Martin taking its place alongside, say, the death of Emmett Till as a terrible marker of the ongoing peril of being young, black, and male in this country.”²⁷ The frequent references to Till in Martin stories are recurring creative acts of allusion that remind audiences of the long histories of racial violence enacted against black boys. Such allusions intensified the perception of the contemporary incident as it unfolded.

The pervasive coverage on Martin does raise questions about why there is comparatively less in-depth reporting on cases involving black victims and perpetrators. There is no question that black folks care about crime and violence between black people. Conflicts between white people and black people, though, seem to inspire more pronounced bodies of writing. African Americans have long spoken out against so-called “black-on-black crime.” Nonetheless, the most concentrated and voluminous creative output proliferates in cases of perceived racist violence and injustice like with Till and Martin.

Leovy offers reasons why there is “relatively little research or activism specific to black-on-black murder.” On the one hand, she explains, researchers evade the subject “for fear of being labeled racist.” Focusing too much on “high rates of black criminality risked invoking the stigma of white racism.” Concurrently, many black community activists and commentators are inclined to downplay the subject of black homicide, especially with broad, diverse audiences. African Americans who publicly

discuss violent crimes committed by other African Americans run the risk of having such accounts “used against them” or “inflaming white racism.”²⁸ Thus, it is less likely for writers and activists to devote as much of their public time and energy to incidents involving violence among black men as opposed to interracial cases.

For some, the problem with the tremendous body of writings on Till, Martin, and select other black boys is that the public interest does not necessarily extend beyond them. Commentators rightly note that violence against black girls, women, trans women, and gay men rarely receives the high level of reporting and intense discussions that cases involving cis gender black boys and men receive. There are clearly biases based on gender at work. The hashtag #SayHerName was created and distributed as a response to the silences related to black girl and women victims. A perceptible interest in narratives about black boys and men explains, to some degree, the discrepancy. Yet there’s more.

We definitely need larger numbers of people to #SayHerName to bring more public concern to the circumstances of black girls and women. However, the role of a Trymaine Lee, specifically his outstanding creative productivity on Martin, should not be overlooked. Shooting incidents involving black boys that lack a journalist with a national platform and incentives to dedicate wide-ranging reporting to the situations will ultimately fail to become major news items. That is to say, black male homicides do not inevitably lead to noticeable coverage, which the families of the thousands of black boys and young men killed each year can easily confirm. Imagine someone producing as much as Lee did on Martin relating to individual cases involving girls and women. It would make a discernable difference.

Of course, a writer with Lee’s particular interests and capabilities arose out of domains that concentrate on black boys, an interest that has persisted for decades, as frequent references to Emmett Till indicate. In his research on creative productivity, Simonton observes that “creativity remains a messy business.” He explains that “sometimes the effort pays off, but all too often the effort is probably wasted. A highly creative career will probably leave a trail of ideas that did not pan out, even whole projects that came to nothing.”²⁹ Lee’s career follows a similar trajectory. He had covered black homicides for years prior to reporting on Martin, and few of his articles on the subject gained national exposure. He remained

persistent though, and when the case in Florida arose in 2012, he was aptly prepared to produce a groundbreaking series of articles.

The coverage on Martin marked a new beginning for contemporary coverage of cases of violence against black people, especially black boys and men harmed by police officers or other supposed officials. The reporting on the shootings of Michael Brown, Tamir Rice, and Walter Scott, among additional victims, invariably mentions Martin, which indicates the extent to which that shooting and its coverage have become a compelling point of reference in ongoing discussions. The slogan “Black Lives Matter” and the movement it names and activist groups such as the Dream Defenders and Million Hoodies Movement for Justice took shape in the aftermath of the shooting death of Martin and the acquittal of Zimmerman. Activists and protestors had become aware of the injustice that occurred in Sanford, Florida, based on the coverage on Martin to which Lee was a leading contributor. He had been motivated to vigorously report the homicide of this black teenager, and in turn, thousands of readers found his articles absorbing. Among those readers was a blogger for the *Atlantic*.

Ta-Nehisi Coates’s Creative High Point and Trayvon Martin

These days Coates is widely known for his article “The Case for Reparations,” his book *Between the World and Me*, and his writing for Marvel comic books *Black Panther* and *Captain America*. Those publications and the subsequent acclaim he received largely overshadow his blogging activities. Yet his blogging in fact constitutes a far more massive creative undertaking. He began blogging for the *Atlantic* on August 4, 2008, and by the end of the month he had published over two hundred entries. Over the course of the next year, he published three to four blog entries each weekday.³⁰

Coates’s subject matter is boundless. He writes about football, politics and politicians, his childhood in Baltimore, attending Howard University, books, movies, father-son relationships (particularly his experiences as the son of a black man and as the father of a black boy), rap music, African American culture, historical figures, and racism, among countless other topics. Between 2009 and 2011 he published a series of more than 350 entries focusing on the Civil War. Between 2011 and 2013 he published

more than 30 blog entries concentrating on brain injury and the National Football League. His studies of the topic led him to stop watching and writing about football. The demand for quantity and scope in his writing, the growing audience made possible by publishing under the *Atlantic* imprint, and the mode of production—blogging—significantly expanded Coates’s creative productivity. Never before had his public writing output been so rapid and expansive. Thus, when he decided to take on the subject of Martin, he did so at a creative high point in his career.

According to Simonton, “Only by engaging in a network of enterprises can the prospects increase” for creators to achieve rewarding breakthroughs. As he notes, “Rather than work on one narrow idea until it is exhausted, it frequently proves more fruitful to work on a diversity of ideas simultaneously.” For Simonton, that “network of enterprises” referred to Thomas Edison’s involvement in overlapping scientific experiments.³¹ Perhaps that aspect of multitasking or exploring ideas corresponds to Coates’s productivity at the *Atlantic*. After all, although he is widely known now based on a small number of articles and books, the majority of his trials and errors have been largely overlooked. Yet those seemingly forgotten compositions, comprised most visibly by his thousands of blog entries, represent his engagement with a network of enterprises, which for him meant reporting, writing, reading, blogging, and participating in exchanges with commenters on his site.

Coates began blogging about the circumstances involving Martin and Zimmerman on March 13, wary because the incident reminded him of past shooting deaths. Who wasn’t familiar with cases where a black boy or man was falsely viewed as suspicious and ultimately killed? What difference did it make to call for justice in the newest shooting when such calls had gone unanswered in the past? Coates expected an unsatisfactory outcome. And he had good reason to anticipate negative results given prior cases of injustice.

One incident in particular gnawed at him. A former college classmate, Prince Jones, was shot to death in September 2000 by a police officer in a case of mistaken identity. The outcome of the case had deeply disturbed Coates and informed his prediction “that there would be no justice.” The Jones shooting likewise strengthened Coates’s faith in the power of writing about injustice. In a reflection on Jones and the aftermath of his death, Coates provided a link to a previous article he had written about Jones and noted that it was “the reason I started writing.”³²

While the Martin shooting death sparked painful memories for Coates, his familiarity with such troubling incidents strengthened his ability to think about the situation from a new perspective. In short, he was primed to approach the Martin shooting with good, original questions. Rather than direct all of his anger at Zimmerman, Coates chose to address the systematic ways that justice and the legal system had failed Martin, the boy's parents, and black people in general. From his opening blog entry on the subject, he raises questions about "Florida's Self-Defense Laws." Coates focuses on the idea that "Zimmerman could lawfully shoot Martin" based on the conditions of Florida's laws, which gave quite a bit of latitude. But, Coates acknowledges, "I'm not sure," an indication that he was still working through the ideas. "The theory that Zimmerman was acting in self-defense got me wondering about the threshold for such a claim," writes Coates. "As it turns out, Florida has one of the broadest set of self-defense statutes in the country."³³ An active search to uncover the trouble and limits with those ostensible self-defense laws, known as Stand Your Ground laws, would drive much of Coates's blogging for the next two months.

On the same day as his first post, Coates produced a later blog entry entitled "Stand Your Ground and Trayvon Martin," where he continued to wonder about the shooting. "I think what's most frustrating about this sort of case, is you can have someone hovering at the edge of the law, escalating a situation, and then retreating behind the law's full weight when the awful consequences are made evident," he writes. "You don't want to hear me say this again, but all I can think about is my old friend, Prince Jones."³⁴ For Coates the defining black male allusion in the Martin shooting was Jones, not Emmett Till. The haunting presence of his former classmate strengthened Coates's personal commitment to the case as well as his sense that such killings are part of larger, contemporary, ongoing problems. Jones was an inspiring force for Coates's series of Martin blog entries, as he would later be for *Between the World and Me*.

Unlike news articles that seek to provide answers concerning a case, Coates was actively collecting and parsing information about Martin, Zimmerman, and the public reaction to the shooting, and he was sharing what he read with his readers. He was simultaneously interrogating the negative outcomes of self-defense laws and cases. "Trayvon Martin is merely the worst case of someone avoiding justice through Stand Your Ground," writes Coates, before citing homicides where shooters invoked

self-defense. “What we have in Florida—and doubtlessly in other parts of the country—is the state relinquishing a crucial aspect of meting out justice,” he explains. “The logic incentivizes an armed citizenry where the beneficiary of justice is simply the last man standing. Your side of the story is irrelevant if you are dead. Perhaps that is the point. I have no idea.”³⁵ His vigorous treatments of the case showcase alternating facets of creativity—problem finding, injustice as inspiration, immersion in sundry creative domains, concentrated cultural cataloging, and a vulnerable, fatally harmed black boy as a muse.

Coates’s series on the Martin shooting went further by illustrating the extent to which blogging could expand the creative activities of a black writer. Beyond publishing his thoughts on the site, Coates was an active participant and diligent moderator in the comments section of his blog. He invited readers to join him in thinking through the issues he addressed in the entries and to assist him in thinking about the topic from alternative positions.

Coates was exercising the role of writer as discussion facilitator and curator in ways that were not as common for commentators, columnists, and conventional print-based writers. His position as a blogger meant that he could accelerate the speed of publication in ways that conventional journalists could not. His position at the *Atlantic* made him unique: unlike nearly all of his thousands of fellow black bloggers, Coates was employed by a national magazine, and unlike most of his peers at those publishing institutions, Coates was not white. His rare positioning advanced the notion of his singular, original perspective.

Blogging as a domain has nurtured conditions for some practitioners to become exceptionally prolific. As Clive Thompson explains in *Smarter Than You Think: How Technology Is Changing Our Minds for the Better* (2013), modes of communication such as email, text messaging, Facebook posts, Twitter, and blogging have greatly increased the writing output of citizens around the world. Thompson points out that “before the Internet came along, most people rarely wrote anything at all for pleasure or intellectual satisfaction after graduating from high school or college.” Aside from academics, lawyers, journalists, and other professionals whose jobs required frequent writing, there was far less “personal expression outside the workplace—in the curious genres and epic volume we now see routinely.” In the age of the Internet and with the ubiquity of mobile communication

technologies, however, much has changed. “We are now,” explains Thompson, “a global culture of avid writers.”³⁶

Blogging has promise for augmented creative productivity. Thompson points out that online writing is “almost always done for an audience.” The “audience effect,” that is, the adjustments people make in behavior and performances when knowingly being observed, can substantially shape overall output. “The effort of communicating to someone else,” notes Thompson, “forces you to think more precisely, make deeper connections, and learn more.”³⁷ Coates was no doubt acutely aware of his large and lively audience as he blogged. They assisted him in improving and altering his thoughts on subjects, and his readers ultimately emboldened him to produce a massive number of blog entries.

Similar to Lee, Coates’s creative output on the Martin shooting was swift and fairly extensive. Between March 13 and April 13, he published more than thirty blog entries (see appendix). He published dozens of responses to readers in the comments section. He presented links to information on the shooting, block quotations from news articles, and excerpts from Florida’s statutes concerning Stand Your Ground. Coates highlighted transcripts from statements such as Zimmerman’s 911 call about Martin. In one entry he ran excerpts from publications highlighting black people speaking out against violence in black communities. Coates presented the information as a counterpoint to statements from conservative commentator Juan Williams and others about supposed “black on black crime.”³⁸

In one entry, “Trayvon Martin Updates,” Coates presents a YouTube video of President Obama, who offers comments and memorably observes that “if I had a son, he’d look like Trayvon.” Coates then notes that “Sanford police chief Bill Lee is done—for now” and provides a link to an article by Trymaine Lee in the *Huffington Post*. Next, Coates presents excerpts of a transcript from “an absolutely disgusting clip from Geraldo Rivera, who essentially blames Trayvon Martin’s death on the fact that he was wearing a hoodie. In the rain.” Coates follows up noting that someone from Twitter pointed out that Rivera’s comments were akin to the “‘what you were wearing’ rapist’s defense.” Coates then writes that “I was on *PBS NewsHour* last night” and provides a link to the video. He provides another link to Obama’s remarks and offers a brief assessment of what the president said: “Stunning. Pitch perfect. No idea how it’ll play. Don’t care right now. Maybe I’ll care later. But for now, I just felt it was a stunning exercise

in political minimalism. That's a compliment." Again, all of those items appear in a single post.³⁹ That blog entry, along with the dozens of other entries in Coates's series on Martin, constitutes a collage of commentary. Coates dynamically *plays* with blogging as a mode of presenting materials in a variety of formats.

That collage of commentary comprises a large assortment of items. In the midst of blogging about Martin and Zimmerman, Coates explores information about Stand Your Ground laws along with related cases. He presents a series of critiques on how the Sanford police mishandled the investigation into Martin's killing. Coates offers appraisals on how President Obama, news organizations, and commentators were addressing the case. His inclination to mix and match subject matter and tap into creative domains enrich the depth and overall originality of his work on the shooting death of Martin. Furthermore, Coates's exploration of so much material across different realms reflects the propensities of a creative writer with a strong devotion to problem finding.

Observers took note of Coates's coverage. Besides appearing on *PBS NewsHour*, he was a guest on *NPR* and the *Brian Lehrer Show*. Countless bloggers and journalists cited Coates's writing on Martin, indicating that his blog entries on the case were valued and widely read. Observers regularly credited Coates with raising the visibility of the coverage. "What started as a local news story went national after the news services picked it up, and such influential bloggers as the *Atlantic's* Ta-Nehisi Coates and the *Huffington Post's* Trymaine Lee called attention to it early on," writes Wil Haygood, Brady Dennis and Sari Horwitz in the *Washington Post*.⁴⁰ E. J. Graff, writing for the *American Prospect*, advises her readers to "follow" Coates in order "to keep up with the emerging facts" in the case.⁴¹ The Martin shooting had become a widely discussed topic, and Coates was viewed by many as a prominent voice in the conversation

Jury selection began on June 10, 2013, in the case of the *State of Florida v. George Zimmerman*; by July 12 the prosecution and defense made their closing arguments. On July 13 the jury rendered its verdict of not guilty. A wide range of public officials, journalists, activists, celebrities, and spectators expressed opinions about the verdict. "We are a nation of laws, and a jury has spoken," said Obama in the aftermath of the jury's verdict. "I now ask every American to respect the call for calm reflection from two parents who lost their young son."⁴² The president emphasized a call for calm

because of the tremendous shock, grief, and anger among hundreds of thousands of people who felt that Zimmerman had gotten away with a grave injustice.

On July 14 Coates published a blog entry, "On the Killing of Trayvon Martin by George Zimmerman," and provided a summary of his thoughts on the verdict. He writes that the "message of this episode is unfortunate. By Florida law, in any violent confrontation ending in a disputed act of lethal self-defense, without eye-witnesses, the advantage goes to the living." He closes the entry by noting that "it's worth remembering that what caused a national outcry was not the possibility of George Zimmerman being found innocent, but that there would be no trial at all."⁴³ Here, he highlights the fact that the injustice of not arresting Zimmerman early on, more than anything, had stirred the outcry. To support his claim about the role of injustice in motivating such strong reactions, Coates mentions Jordan Davis, another black boy shooting victim from Florida, who was killed on November 23, 2012.⁴⁴

Why had the national coverage on the shooting death of Davis been sparse in comparison to the response to Martin? Maybe that's the wrong question. The thousands of homicides that take place each year mean that relatively few shooting deaths will generate comprehensive commentary. We might rest on firmer ground by taking account of the factors in those outlier cases that gain extraordinary public notice. Why was the Martin case so compelling? How had this once local story, unlike the vast majority of shooting deaths, evolved into a national story and movement? As strange as it is to say, from the beginning the Martin shooting, more so than other homicides, was infused with intriguing, stimulating plot lines, subplots, visual symbols, main characters, and sequences of events. In addition, the Martin family benefited from the services of media savvy attorneys and a publicist.⁴⁵

The fact that Martin had been watching the NBA all-star game on the day that he was killed became a reason for professional basketball players, most notably the Miami Heat, to enact a strong public, visual statement of support for Martin and his family. Seemingly minor details such as skittles, iced tea, and hoodies became recurring rhetorical devices in the expanding domain on Martin.⁴⁶ Zimmerman's role as an armed neighborhood watchman, who was recorded falsely characterizing the teenager as a criminal, heightened public outrage. Obama's public statement about the incident

elevated Martin and his circumstances well above the typical anonymous homicide victims. The long delay between the February 26 shooting death of Martin and the April 11 arrest of Zimmerman intensified accusations that the Sanford police were racially insensitive, if not blatantly racist. Without those captivating factors, the narrative would not have reached its tipping point and generated such a high level of public interest.

In retrospect, it's clear that aspects of Coates's more widely cited publications—"The Case for Reparations" and *Between the World and Me*—began to take shape in his blog entries about Martin and Zimmerman and the initial mistrial of Michael Dunn, who had shot and killed Jordan Davis. By late 2013 and into 2014 Coates was blogging less, but he was still actively searching for the right question. As he notes in one entry, "The ability to frame the question is its own gift—even if you can't quite name the answer."⁴⁷ Coates was formulating questions that would take him beyond individual racial problems and court cases. "If you are simply focusing on what happened in the courtroom," he writes in reference to the Zimmerman verdict, "then you have been head-faked by history and you have bought into an idea of fairness which cannot possibly exist." Coates's studies had led him to the conclusion that the violent deaths of Martin and Davis and the trials of Zimmerman and Dunn were manifestations of longstanding practices and policies in this country.

"It is painful to say this," notes Coates: "Trayvon Martin is not a miscarriage of American justice, but American justice itself. This is not our system malfunctioning. It is our system working as intended." As far as America's treatment of black people, Coates deploys a popular quotation from the NFL: "We are what our record says we are." He then asks, "How can we sensibly expect different?"⁴⁸ Coates was entering what he would later refer to as his "blue period," a solemn phase of understanding that black people would perpetually be oppressed under the weight of white supremacy. Questions about injustice and troubling legal statutes that make black people vulnerable to harm that Coates so insistently explored in his writings on Martin would turn up again in his article "The Case for Reparations." Researching and writing about the circumstances of Martin's and Davis's deaths strengthened Coates's understanding of just how defenseless black boys are in a country with a history so intertwined with white supremacy. That understanding would become a critical component of *Between the World and Me*. Like Coates, Trymaine Lee's experiences

writing about Martin and Davis would prime him for reporting on future projects. One of those projects was Lee's reporting on a shooting death in Ferguson, Missouri. Before that, though, Lee covered a special initiative concerning black boys.

Mike Brown, Problem Finding, and Productivity

The death of Trayvon Martin, which "sparked a roiling national debate about race and class," just as well inspired President Obama to action. In February 2014 the White House launched My Brother's Keeper, a program designed to provide mentoring and educational support to black and Latino boys.⁴⁹ While there has been a long history of initiatives for assisting black boys, none of those programs had a sitting president at the forefront. My Brother's Keeper gained far-ranging media coverage, in part because of Obama's backing and because of the hundreds of millions of dollars that were donated to the program.⁵⁰ "No president has gone to these lengths to be a hands-on role model and mentor," writes Mike Wise in an article on My Brother's Keeper. Obama "has sat with youths in the White House, in Chicago and in Camden, New Jersey. Often his message is one of self-help and the imperative to overcome one's circumstances."⁵¹ Obama's program, which gained bipartisan support, represents one of the most visible, well-funded initiatives created to address the needs of vulnerable black and Latino boys.

The extent to which the shooting death of Martin led to the formation of My Brother's Keeper suggests how issues involving black boys in perilous circumstances can inspire far-reaching projects. Community organizations are constantly implementing programs in African American neighborhoods to respond to the dilemma of wayward black boys and young men. Dozens of colleges and universities create initiatives to address black men students—a demographic that is frequently identified as having low retention and graduation rates. Law enforcement agencies and reporters across the country often report on the alleged criminal activities of young black men. All of these issues and more led to excessive numbers of problem-finding and problem-solving processes. My Brother's Keeper was thus another effort, among more than a century of efforts, to address the trouble with black males.

Although widely praised, Obama's program drew two major lines of critique. "We are profoundly troubled about the exclusion of women and girls of color from this critical undertaking," noted a letter organized by the African American Policy Forum and signed by over fourteen hundred scholars, activists, and artists. "The need to acknowledge the crisis facing boys should not come at the expense of addressing the stunted opportunities for girls who live in the same households, suffer in the same schools, and struggle to overcome a common history of limited opportunities caused by various forms of discrimination."⁵² In an editorial published in the *New York Times*, legal scholar Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw offers a pointed negative appraisal of the program: "Perhaps the exclusion of women and girls is the price to be paid for any race-focused initiative in this era. 'Fixing' men of color—particularly young black men—hits a political sweet spot among populations that both love and fear them."⁵³

Crenshaw understandably views that "political sweet spot" as a problem. From this perspective, the overemphasis on black males regularly delimits possibilities to address or include black girls, women, and trans gender people. Consequently, the notion that people love, fear, adore, despise, hate, revere, misunderstand, and debate about such a large number and variety of black boys and men across decades explains why they are so pervasive as subjects in the works of writers. Sexism, patriarchy, and male privilege account for some of the reasons why black men stand out as focal points more so than black women. But there's more. Additional factors have determined that black males appear as primary subjects in highly visible domains. Far from being mostly positive subjects of cultural commentary, black males are frequently negative subjects as well, with commentators determined to devote considerable energy to covering black men sellouts, alleged criminals, deadbeat dads, convicts, all manner of thugs, and varieties of delinquent youth.

When Obama spoke to majority black audiences, he was known to single out alleged irresponsible fathers and unruly boys for their detrimental behavior. In response, Coates, Cornel West, Michael Eric Dyson, Frederick C. Harris, Michelle Alexander, Reverend Kevin Johnson, and Donovan X. Ramsey critiqued Obama for how he spoke to African American audiences, especially concerning how black boys and black men should behave.⁵⁴ Obama has said that his messages to African Americans relate to his own experiences and feelings about his own upbringing. In particular, he

acknowledges that he emphasizes “taking responsibility as fathers” to black audiences because “I am a black man who grew up without a father and I know the cost that I paid for that. And I also know that I have the capacity to break that cycle, and as a consequence, I think my daughters are better off.”⁵⁵ Bad black men and the idea of misguided black boys have been conspicuous, recurring muses for the former president, which probably raised the likelihood that he would pursue a project like *My Brother’s Keeper*.

Obama and his aides defended the program against critiques like those offered by Crenshaw by pointing out the existence of the White House Council on Women and Girls. He went on to highlight the need for community leaders to “publicly commit to implementing strategies to ensure that all young people can succeed.” The emphasis on “young people” and not only black boys, explains Dani McClain, reflects Obama’s awareness of the gender-based critiques.⁵⁶

The absence of girls of color in Obama’s program was one matter. Additionally, some commentators charged that *My Brother’s Keeper* was trafficking in a somewhat conservative approach, choosing to focus on black male behavior while evidently overlooking racist and systemic barriers. Journalist Mychal Denzel Smith critiqued the program for primarily concentrating on respectability while “ignoring the root problem” of white supremacy. Smith concluded that *My Brother’s Keeper* sought to help “black and Latino boys find success within a racist system. In some ways, it’s admirable. But finding ‘success,’ however narrowly defined, in the face of racism is not the same as defeating racism.”⁵⁷ The appraisals of the initiative contributed to long-running debates about ways to respond to black boys and African American communities and whether such responses neglected black girls or overemphasized respectability training for black boys while downplaying the need to design policies to address antiblack racism.

Between February and July 2014, Lee produced a series of articles on *My Brother’s Keeper*. At this point, he was writing for MSNBC, where he began working in November 2012. Lee’s coverage of the Martin case had raised his profile, and the move to MSNBC would make it possible for him to publish articles and occasionally participate in on-air interviews.⁵⁸ Lee had covered a variety of stories since the Martin shooting. Reporting on *My Brother’s Keeper*, however, gave him opportunities to put the circumstances of black boys and young men into broader perspective. “The bleak statistics for black boys here are like lyrics to a sad song that everyone’s

tired of hearing but no one knows how to mute,” opens Lee in one article about the merits of the Oakland Unified School District’s “office of African American Male Achievement (AAMA)—the first and only school district in the country with an office explicitly dedicated to lifting the prospects of black boys.”⁵⁹ My Brother’s Keeper gave Lee a chance to report on one of the most comprehensive and widely publicized plans to address the needs and interests of black boys in trouble. In retrospect, Lee’s series of writings about this hopeful initiative seem like the calm before the storm.

At noon on August 9, 2014, Officer Darren Wilson approached Michael Brown and his friend Dorian Johnson as they walked down Canfield Drive in Ferguson, Missouri. From his SUV Wilson ordered the two boys to get out of the middle of the street. A physical altercation began to occur between Brown and Wilson while the officer was still in his vehicle. Wilson fired his gun and shot Brown in the hand. Here is where conflicting reports from witnesses arise, but apparently Wilson exited his SUV and pursued Brown, who had begun to flee.⁶⁰ At some point, Wilson shot Brown as the two faced each other. Was Brown charging the officer, or was the teenager holding his hands up in a gesture of surrender? Elliott C. McLaughlin reported that “it’s a case of he said, he said. The accounts of why a police officer fatally shot Michael Brown on a street in Ferguson, Missouri, on Saturday couldn’t be more disparate.”⁶¹ Whatever the case, Wilson fired his weapon and shot Brown six times, killing the unarmed teenager.

For the next four hours Brown’s body lay in the street as law enforcement investigated the crime scene. Residents of Canfield Apartments began to gather and post images of the black boy lying on the street on social media accounts. News media arrived and began reporting from the scene. Police-related deaths of black people were not uncommon. On March 21, 2012, an off-duty police detective in Chicago, Illinois, mistakenly shot and killed Rekia Boyd. On September 14, 2013, police officers in Bradford Farms, North Carolina, shot and killed Jonathan Ferrell. On March 3, 2014, in Iberia Parish, Louisiana, Victor White, while handcuffed in the back of a police car, was said to have used a gun to kill himself.⁶² On July 17, 2014, a New York City officer applied a chokehold on Eric Garner, as he uttered what became his dying words: “I can’t breathe.”⁶³ The list goes on and on. But rarely, however, was the dead body of a black boy allowed to stay in the street so long, a vivid indication for some of us how worthless black life was for the state.

Unlike the Martin case, which required time and effort to evolve into a lead story for news organizations, journalists from across the country descended on Ferguson almost immediately. New agencies realized this would be a leading story, and they provided ample support for coverage.⁶⁴ Two days after Brown was killed, Lee was in Ferguson reporting on the shooting, the unrest and demonstrations among protestors, and the forceful response from police officers, including the use of tear gas. The field of reporters in the case was so dense that Lee was not singled out as a leading voice the way that he had been with his coverage on Martin. Yet there are still indicators of the scope of his productivity. For one, the *Huffington Post* no longer had a journalist with Lee's skill set and interests, so that publication published far less visible coverage on Brown than on Martin.

Moreover, the reporting that Lee produced for MSNBC was truly incredible. Between August and December he wrote more than fifty articles and co-wrote six more pieces on Brown and Ferguson. He interviewed more than sixty people, referenced and quoted dozens more, and tapped into coverage on Ferguson, police violence, and activism.⁶⁵ Collectively, news teams devoted protracted coverage to the shooting death and subsequent protests, but few, if any, reporters matched the individual output produced by Lee. He had been priming himself to cover this kind of gun violence since his early days as a police and crime reporter for the *Philadelphia Tribune* in 2003. Back then Lee would publish one or two stories summarizing a shooting that occurred and highlighting the outcome and feelings of the victim and the victim's family. More than ten years later, however, Lee had grown as a journalist.

His sizable reporting on Brown and Ferguson is a reflection of his hard-won expertise and his increased creative capabilities. Lee had moved beyond reporting on cases with one or two or even ten or fifteen stories. Like a muralist, he was producing his work on a large canvas now. Doing so required a broad vision of situations and problem finding. Creativity researchers J. W. Getzels and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi have explained that "problematic situations do not present themselves automatically as *problems* capable of solution." Instead, those situations "must be formulated in creative ways if they are to be moved to creative solutions."⁶⁶ Lee and other journalists were doing more than simply recounting the facts of a shooting. What made their work in Ferguson so enriching was that the reporters were interested in discovering complex unanswered questions—or problem finding.

Lee's reporting on Brown became an examination of the struggles of black citizens in Ferguson and the larger St. Louis region. In "Michael Brown Shooting Unearths Ferguson's Deeper Troubles," Lee describes the history of racial problems in Ferguson and "the broad patchwork of poor black towns" surrounding St. Louis. "The public schools in the area have long been failing. Unemployment and poverty are among the highest in the state," he writes. "And long and hard-drawn segregation continues to pervade most aspects of life here, even down to the mostly white police forces that patrol this black belt draped beside the big city."⁶⁷ Segregation, poverty, and life in areas patrolled by majority white police forces are recurring topics throughout Lee's series of articles. He is in effect problem finding—searching for the crucial questions that could explain what makes the shooting death of a black boy possible.

There is more. Lee explored the longstanding "mistrust" between police officers and Ferguson residents.⁶⁸ He reported on statements from Obama and Eric Holder, who was then the US attorney general.⁶⁹ Lee tracked the lead-up to and responses to the grand jury's decision not to indict Wilson for the shooting. He additionally produced articles on the protests taking place in Ferguson. In this regard his chronicling of activism in response to police shootings of black people extended early coverage of what people now recognize as the Black Lives Matter movement. Finally, on December 29, Lee published "2014: The year of Michael Brown"—a culmination of months of reporting on the case. In that article he reflects on Brown, the evolving approaches of law enforcement and protestors, "a patchwork of seemingly inexplicable deaths at the hands of police," the civil rights investigations being conducted by the Department of Justice, and other developments since August.⁷⁰ Lee's articles on Brown and Ferguson constitute critical contributions to the most widely reported police shooting of a black boy in history.

Despite the importance of Lee's writing on this subject, his work is unlikely to gain sustained or visible examinations. There are scarcely any apparatuses, outside of journalism programs, for studying the work of journalists beyond the moment, especially if the work is not collected in book form. The field of African American literary studies privileges books as well as artistic and scholarly writings. Anthology editors typically reprint short stories, novel excerpts, and poems, not news articles, and scholars tend to appraise the works of literary artists, not reporters. In the realms of

journalism, long-form articles and breaking news items more often receive commendation in retrospect than the kind of series Lee produced. For these reasons, his Brown and Ferguson coverage will likely and unfortunately not receive substantial notice, even though the work remains outstanding and foundational to the domain known as Black Lives Matter.

Similar to pointing out the exclusion of black girls from My Brother's Keeper, activists and scholars have critiqued media outlets and organizers for overlooking the large number of black girls and women who have likewise been the victims of police violence. Too often, the only victims of police brutality to receive adequate acknowledgment are black boys and men. "Although black women are routinely killed, raped, and beaten by the police, their experiences are rarely foregrounded in popular understanding of police brutality," explains Crenshaw. "Yet inclusion of black women's experiences in social movements, media narratives, and policy demands around policing and police brutality is critical to successfully combating racialized state violence for black communities and other communities of color."⁷¹ A large number of online activists and commentators utilize the hashtag #SayHerName as a rallying call for greater public interest in the circumstances that led to the deaths of Sandra Bland, Tanisha Anderson, and Kyam Livingston, among others, who were killed by police officers or who died while in police custody.

In 2015 Crenshaw and Andrea J. Ritchie authored a report, *Say Her Name: Resisting Police Brutality against Black Women*, published by the African American Policy Forum, which documented the deaths of dozens of black women. The report "sheds light on Black Women's experiences of police violence in an effort to support a gender inclusive approach to racial justice that centers all Black lives equally," note Crenshaw and Ritchie. They expressed hope that their document "will serve as a tool for the resurgent justice movement to mobilize around the stories of Black women who have lost their lives to police violence."⁷² *Say Her Name* and the broader #SayHerName campaign on social media stand as indispensable critiques concerning the lack of news coverage on black women victims of police brutality. *Say Her Name* and #SayHerName also raise awareness about the failure of Black Lives Matter activism and other protests against police brutality to effectively acknowledge black girls and women victims.

In “The Media Failed Black Women by Not Covering This Rape Trial,” Treva Lindsey critiques the scarcity of reporting on former police officer Daniel Holtzclaw, who was found guilty of eighteen of the thirty-six rape and sexual violence charges laid against him. Lindsey points out that “young, affluent white women and girl victims/accusers of violent crimes are more likely to receive media attention than women of color, particularly poor women of color.” Some of Holtzclaw’s victims were viewed as “imperfect accusers,” meaning some had criminal records; some had drug addictions; and some had worked as prostitutes, all of which would ostensibly make them less credible in the eyes of some jurors and news outlets. “The lack of coverage thwarted a national conversation about sexual violence as a distinct form of police brutality,” writes Lindsey. “The stories of these women need to serve as an important intervention in conversations about anti-black state violence, rape culture, and the vulnerability of sex workers, ex-offenders, and current and recovering drug addicts to state and state-sanctioned violence.”⁷³

In addition to continuing the needed work of critiquing media coverage for only privileged victims and survivors, those of us who study black writing might examine the different subject positions of writers producing work on vulnerable populations. Crenshaw, a legal scholar and academic, led the way on critiques of the exclusion of black girls from Obama’s My Brother’s Keeper initiative. She was also at the forefront of the #SayHerName campaign. By contrast, journalists like Coates and Lee gained visibility, more so than most academics, during high-profile police brutality cases against black boys and men. The lack of media coverage that Crenshaw, Lindsey, and additional women received is linked to sexism as well as the paucity of national journalists situated to capably write about crimes and injustices against black girls, women, trans women, and gay men. There are simply not enough well-positioned journalists to adequately cover these concerns. People with interests in black feminism and intersectionality are typically advised to become academics, not journalists. Accordingly, the scholarly discourse on black women is quite thorough but less widely available than the kinds of news coverage that have been available on figures like Martin and Brown. In those cases, public knowledge and subsequent activism were dependent on the creative productivity of journalists.

Academics and journalists, by the way, are not the only kinds of black writers to produce work on the shooting deaths of Martin and Brown.

Literary artists, especially poets, have also contributed to writings on such violence. *Resisting Arrest: Poems to Stretch the Sky* (2016), edited by Tony Medina, and *Of Poetry and Protest: From Emmett Till to Trayvon Martin* (2016), edited by Philip Cushway and Michael Warr, collectively contain poems by more than a hundred poets addressing subjects such as violence against black people, including dozens of poems about police brutality. In his volume *Thief in the Interior* (2016), Phillip B. Williams writes about the appalling, unsolved murder of Rashawn Brazell, whose dismembered body was discovered in February 2005, days after his reported disappearance. In her volume *Incendiary Art*, Patricia Smith writes about violence against a range of black people, especially Emmett Till. The volume includes poems about fairly recent victims of police violence, including Shereese Francis, Kendrec McDade, Natasha McKenna, and several others.⁷⁴ The notion of injustice as inspiration constitutes a driving force of the poems concerning violence against African Americans produced by poets over the last decade.

Lee's reporting on Martin and Brown and Coates's blogging on Martin represent noteworthy, creative contributions to the larger domains about violence inflicted upon black boys. The two writers—a reporter and blogger—produced extensive series of writings in real time, showcasing varied possibilities for high-quantity, fast-paced compositions on young black male homicide victims. The extent and dimensions of their compositions, situated within the even larger coverage on Martin and Brown, are testaments to the significance of injustice as inspiration, especially in the cases of black boys killed by white law enforcement (or presumable law enforcement).⁷⁵ The quantity of writings they produced signals the capacity of online venues to facilitate exhaustive bodies of work. The ease with which links to Coates's blog entries and Lee's articles could be shared on social media reflects the shifting, powerful roles of technology in the circulation of black writing. Further, the large, concentrated quantities of compositions by Coates and Lee confirm that the topic of injustices to black boys can inspire exceptional creative productivity.