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# Introduction: Lynching, Incarceration's Cousin: From Till to Trayvon

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# Introduction

## Lynching, Incarceration's Cousin: From Till to Trayvon

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In August Wilson's dramatic work consisting of 10 plays covering the twentieth century, decade by decade, nine set in Pittsburgh and one set in Chicago, a prison experience is like a trampoline, a foundational place from which a multitude of characters has rebounded. With creative economy funding from the President's Office of the University of Massachusetts, the Trotter Institute and the Department of Performing Arts at UMass Boston is presenting staged readings of all 10 Wilson plays from August through December 2013. We are doing this series in commemoration of the 150th anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation, noting that emancipation, access to the full and untrammelled enjoyment of citizenship, is still more promise than reality. In *Fences*, Wilson's most famous play, Troy Maxson, spent time in jail. So did Sterling Johnson in *Two Trains Running* and *Gem of the Ocean*; so did Booster in *Jetney*. The same is true of Levee in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* and Herald Loomis in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*. All of them, and several more Wilson characters, have been to jail and struggled with reintegrating themselves into society. Wilson, who chronicled the twentieth century, saw prison as a reality that kept interrupting lives and flinging casualties on every street corner.

The wholesale criminalizing of the black male has been much in the news, put there by the Trayvon Martin case and the Florida verdict. (Incidentally, even though we don't often think of it, Florida was where the first African slaves were installed in America, back in

the 1500s in the city of St. Augustine.) As an academic, which, loosely translated means that I often bury my head between the covers of a book trying to figure out one thing or another, I am thought of as someone who is cautious and circumspect in what I think and write, but I cannot be at this time. When I heard the news late on a Saturday night that the jury deliberations in Florida ended with exoneration, I was speechless. I simply could not believe that a young man going to his father's house after buying Skittles and a soft drink could be killed, shot in the street, and no one would be accountable and, on the contrary, he would be the one who was suspect. So the label of *criminal*, ever at the ready, was put to work, and the person who pulled the trigger that blasted a teen off the planet was acting in self defense.

On the other hand, however, in the context of history and business as usual it all makes sense, quite perfectly in fact. There is symmetry here. It is not as if we have not seen this scenario or pattern before. What I did not understand, though, until I was reading Michelle Alexander's book, *The New Jim Crow*, is how insidious it all is and how connected this program of dispossessing the browns is denying them political status and disconnecting them from personal, social, and political value and validity. Criminalizing brown folk is nothing new. (By using *brown* I am unhinging from the negatives that accrue to the use of *black* or other racial synonyms and tend to map, in knee-jerk fashion, to disadvantage and distrust.) In this country, there is a long history of punishing brown males, beating and even killing them in ritualized murder. The cruelty of some slave masters eventuated in the sacrifice of their charges. One particularly gruesome killing was conducted by the nephews of Thomas Jefferson in Kentucky in 1811. A brown boy who broke a pitcher was beaten to death, axed to bits, and his dismembered flesh fed to the fire in front of the assembled slaves of Lilburne and Isham Lewis so they would know the high cost of not doing as they were told. Still, we are told that lynching did not begin until after the Civil War. Killing browns and getting off scot-free is entrenched practice. In the lynching campaign after the Civil War, when the defeated South reversed history and enacted victory by wholesale killing of the browns, the deed was done mostly at night under sheet-covered faces. Then the practice of killing the browns

was so condoned and celebrated that it came out into the open in the 1890s. News of an upcoming lynching was put in the papers. Trains were scheduled to accommodate an overflow of customers going to the festivities of death. Cameras snapped, and pieces of bone and rope were distributed to the crowds, often in the thousands, who were delighted at being part of the ceremony of killing and having no one to stop them. That was what they considered freedom. Taking into their hands the power of gods to kill at will. All through the first half of the twentieth century, the horses and cars and trains of lynching were unstoppable.

In 1955, a change came, but it didn't stop the deadly game. A boy named Emmett Till came down from Chicago to visit relatives in Mississippi for the summer and was killed. His body was discovered at the bottom of a river. Before dying, he had been beaten and punished so badly that the face of the fourteen-year-old boy looked like he was seventy. Quickly, the body was shipped to Chicago for burial in a closed casket. His mother defied the order to keep the casket closed. She made sure it was open and on public view so that the world could see what southern hands had wrought. There was a trial, but the men who killed Till were set free by a jury of their peers. Many have called Trayvon Martin this generation's Till.

Criminalization, the sanction to punish and even kill, is engineered as an analogue to slavery, Michelle Alexander tells us. It denies citizenship status, eliminating and abrogating individual rights and political standing. Being cast into a criminal class is like being sent to political purgatory. You are not good enough for heaven, but you are just right for burning because your brain is a mine of sin. Whether or not you have done anything, crime is affixed to you. And that fixing is the way the browns get their lifelong suspect status. Trayvon Martin was a suspect from the moment he was born, and all of us who share his blood are suspects as well. Any rights that we think are ours by birth are suspended. Should someone decide we look like we are about to commit an act needing sanction, then it's open season with the killing license, and a bullet can escape the barrel with deadly force, no questions asked, no penalty imposed. Whatever is done, the guilty ones are brown. They were born guilty,

and that stain will never be erased. Over and over again, they will be profiled and killed and imprisoned; their lives will be blighted and so will the lives and futures of their brown children and grandchildren. It is a dire message and grave: America does not like, nor has it ever liked, brown. But, those brown folks do have their uses. They can sing. They can dance. They got color. They can clean. They can cook. They can even play ball. And they are a bargain by the numbers; they can be the sources of everyday profit, just like they were before Lincoln and the Emancipation and before a horde of them took to their soles and heels and got the hell out of southern Dodge.

In *Two Trains Running*, Holloway, a retired roofer who has seen a lot, talks about stacking niggers, how that was the way money was made during slavery. Anyone coming over on the boat would get hold of a nigger and put that tom or wench to work, maybe even breed them together, thus getting one or two more, and then the future was gravy for him and his children, *ad infinitum*. There was plenty of work then, and they didn't even get a lunch hour. Now that they have to be paid, Holloway adds, there is precious little work to be had for them. With slavery, at least by that name, gone, all those surplus brown bodies can be warehoused, and the guards and upkeep people and the administrators can be salaried, and the landowners and builders can count their guilders. The young ones, who are still ripe and undisciplined, who look like they might give the future a little trouble, especially if they wear hoodies, can be used for target practice. No one will care or cry out for too long—no one who really matters, that is—if they are chased down and killed, even if the only thing they did was go walking while brown. In a sports mad society, what better sport is there for the untrained dilettante than to prove how American he is, even if his roots go back just one generation, by pulling the trigger and knocking one or more bad little brownies out of the ball park, smack into eternity. The fealty fee to be a full-fledged American if your own status is questionable might be to butter your bread on the status quo side and pledge full allegiance by taking down a brown.

That wasn't what I planned to write. I was going to comment on all the good policy work that is being done in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts to address the needs of the man or woman returning

from jail and eager to reconnect with work, family, and community. I was also going to make it clear to all our readers that we came up with this topic for the *Trotter Review* before Michelle Alexander published her book. Now that I've said that, it would be remiss of me if I didn't note that Dr. Castellano Turner, who served a stint as director of the Trotter Institute and was a long-term faculty member here in the Sociology Department, suggested this topic. In closing, I will share and also paraphrase what Andrea Cabral, a former sheriff who supervised the state-run jail and House of Correction in Suffolk County, told me when I visited her office several years ago. What pains me more than I can ever express, she said, is the faces and attitudes of the children who come to visit their parents. They think of jail as normal. And it isn't long before they are back here, not as visitors, but as inmates.

How can this nation relinquish the threat cycle of constant criminalization and unrequited death which makes everyone brown, young or old, male or female, and any other designation that can be applied, in imminent danger from birth? With the sesquicentennial of the Emancipation Proclamation come and gone, perhaps it is time to focus on working together, all hands on deck, to cast another American future, one that unhinges from the inequities of business as usual. Otherwise, the American addiction of stuffing jails with brown bodies and eliminating them on a whim by impromptu execution will continue unabated and perhaps even escalate. The demographics are changing, though, and the death tactic of lynching that undid the Civil War loss by blood and fire through the nineteenth century and into the twentieth cannot summon quite as substantial an army in the twenty-first. Too many saw and remember the bloody pulp that was the face of Till. So, the need continues to cultivate and reward anyone willing to kill under pretext. As Sterling announces late in Wilson's last play, sides are drawn.

—**Barbara Lewis, PhD**

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