

4 Racial Violence and Racial Profiling: From #OscarGrant to #TrayvonMartin

While those invested in issues of racial justice have always deployed media strategies to produce counternarratives opposing white supremacist logic, the advent of Twitter has significantly changed the ways in which ordinary people and activists do their work. One of the first and most visible instances of the shift to digital- and social media-based racial justice organizing followed the 2009 murder of Oscar Grant by Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) police officer Johannes Mehserle Grant, a twenty-two-year-old Black father on his way home from celebrating New Year's Eve with friends, was shot in the back by Mehserle in the early morning hours of January 1, 2009, after BART police responded to calls of a fight on the train. Grant had no weapon and was already subdued when Mehserle pulled his service weapon and fired. Grant died of his injuries seven hours later.

A number of bystanders recorded the killing on their cell phones. One person anonymously submitted footage to local television station KTVU, which broadcast the unedited video and later posted it to YouTube.¹ The videos shot by bystanders would prove important to the case, particularly because of the discrepancies between the officers' accounts of what happened

and that of other witnesses. Some witnesses reported the police attempted to confiscate their phones and footage of the incident, which led to more protests on- and offline.

Racial justice activists in Oakland and beyond quickly linked the murder of Grant to the 1991 police beating of Rodney King, which was also captured on video by a witness, who in that case filmed with a trendy-for-the-time 8mm Sony Handycam. The citizen-recorded video footage of the defenseless King being brutally beaten by four white LAPD officers spread quickly through national and international television broadcasts after being sent to local news station KTLA.² Despite this evidence, the acquittal of these officers in a suburban court a year later sparked the 1992 L.A. riots. The public debate over what these events in Los Angeles meant about race, policing, and journalism in America consumed not only mainstream media at the time but the Black press and other counterpublic outlets as well.³ Eighteen years later the cell-phone videos of Mehserle fatally shooting Oscar Grant spurred a renewed public debate about police brutality and racism, but with user-generated YouTube content that went viral without requiring the attention or the mediation of traditional news outlets. These videos were viewed 500,000 times in the four days following the shooting, and once KTVU posted the video on its website, it averaged more than a thousand views an hour.⁴ The shooting of Grant motivated spontaneous protests as people in the Oakland area took to the streets to express their outrage.

Organizers used Twitter, a fledgling platform at the time, to inform community members when and where to meet for the first protest of Grant's death on January 7, 2009. A year and a half later, on July 8, 2010, Mehserle was convicted of involuntary manslaughter, not second-degree murder, which prompted yet more protests in the city of Oakland. Twitter was deployed again

in the aftermath of Mehserle's trial, this time to help demonstrators avoid run-ins with police. Using what Paolo Gerbaudo calls the "choreography of assembly," which combines traditional on-the-ground activism with technology-based coordination, Oakland residents tweeted the positions of police blockades and helped those on the ground navigate the city streets.⁵ Eighty people were arrested, but the number might have been higher were it not for fast-acting, Twitter-savvy organizers.

Since 2009, the #OscarGrant hashtag has been used in conjunction with other hashtags that mark the names of Black people subject to extrajudicial killings. The murders of Kiwane Carrington, Ramarley Graham, Aaron Campbell, Rekia Boyd, Aiyana Jones, and Raymond Allen were discussed and debated by means of co-occurring hashtags between 2009 and 2012, but it was the 2012 murder of Trayvon Martin that solidified Twitter hashtags as a crucial organizing tool for racial justice activists. Within a week of Martin's murder, Twitter users were comparing the case with that of Grant. That was just the beginning of what would become a resounding chorus calling for justice.

Making the Case for Trayvon Martin On- and Offline

On February 26, 2012, seventeen-year-old Trayvon Martin walked to a convenience store near his father's home in Sanford, Florida, for Skittles and a drink. On his way home, he was confronted by George Zimmerman, a member of a neighborhood watch group, who fatally shot him. It took six weeks and a coordinated on- and offline effort by Martin's family, their legal team, and activists before Zimmerman was indicted.⁶ Zimmerman's acquittal the following year sparked the Black Lives Matter movement.

- a)  **Raylina** @raylinar · 8 Mar 2012
George zimmerman is the new johannes mehserle smh #rip #trayvonmartin #oscargrant
- b)  **Bamb-brrrraaatt** @BambuDePistola · 20 Mar 2012
#OSCARGRANT's murderer, Johannes Mehserle is free and #TRAYVONMARTIN's murderer is free as well. This is clearly a systemic issue.
- c)  **I Am NikkiFree** @iamnikkifree · 14 Mar 2012
First it was #oscargrant. Now it's #trayvonmartin! We marched & protested in Oakland until Oscar's killer was charged & convicted! Florida?

Figure 4.1

Users created early co-occurrence between #TrayvonMartin and #Oscar-Grant.

Trayvon Martin's murder was initially covered, briefly, in local media outlets. The *Orlando Sentinel* reported on February 29 that a "boy, 17, [was] shot to death in Sanford during 'altercation.'"⁷ It was not until Martin's family procured representation by civil rights attorney Benjamin Crump, who in turn brought in a local attorney with connections to a publicist, that they were able to increase the profile of the case through strategic media engagement. One consequence of the work of this publicist was that Kevin Cunningham, a white graduate of Howard University Law School, learned of the case and started a Change.org petition demanding Zimmerman's indictment.

Change.org, a website that allows users to create petitions that can be spread via links on different internet platforms, was used by Cunningham to collect more than 10,000 signatures in just a few days. On March 8 the petition was turned over to Martin's parents, whose grief, as articulated in their open letter on the petition, galvanized the public, making it the most popular petition on the site for several years. They wrote,



Figure 4.2

Janelle Monáe tweet of the Trayvon Martin Change.org petition.

It's been nearly two weeks and the Sanford Police have refused to arrest George Zimmerman. In their public statements, they even go so far as to stand up for the killer—saying he's "a college grad" who took a class in criminal justice.

Please join us in calling on Angela Corey, Florida's 4th District State's Attorney, to investigate my son's murder and prosecute George Zimmerman for the shooting and killing of Trayvon Martin.⁸

It would take just six days for celebrities to begin tweeting the petition. After March 13 there was a significant uptick in petition signatures once celebrities, including Spike Lee and Mia Farrow, began to tweet about it. The petition had nearly a million signatures, for example, when singer Janelle Monáe tweeted the link and encouraged people to sign.⁹

Monáe's tweet also coincided with the Million Hoodie March, organized by Daniel Maree and others in New York City. In coordination with the march, ordinary people and celebrities across the country showed their solidarity with Martin's family by posting selfies donning hoodies, commenting on the banal nature of the clothing that was being discussed in the media by conservative pundits like Geraldo Rivera as "thug wear."¹⁰ The march spurred more celebrity support from rappers Nelly and Sean "Diddy" Combs. Additional Twitter sharing of the Change.org

petition by celebrities like Cher and John Legend helped push the number of signatures past one million. On March 23, basketball star LeBron James tweeted a photo of himself and Miami Heat teammates donning hoodies and bowing their heads before gearing up for a game against the Detroit Pistons.

The Change.org petition was the most successful and visible one, but other petitions were created to demand justice for Trayvon Martin as well. Maria Roach created a MoveOn.org petition on March 17 that eventually received 500,000 signatures. In addition to petitions, Black organizations such as the Black Youth Project, Dream Defenders, and Color of Change began to champion Martin through other online and on-the-ground campaigns and actions. Independent and Black media such as *Global Grind* and the *Tom Joyner Morning Show* also became instrumental in making Trayvon Martin a household name. By March 26, Martin's family was able to deliver 2.1 million signatures demanding action on the case to Sanford authorities. Zimmerman was finally charged on April 11, one month and seventeen days after he killed Martin.

While social media platforms were used to support Martin, they were also used to support Zimmerman, who created a website to raise money for his defense using PayPal in early April. And building on the popular #Planking and #Tebowing memes, the hashtag #Trayvoning was used by mostly white youth to post pictures of themselves posed as if dead with Skittles and AriZona Iced Tea in their hands. The Zimmerman camp's use of PayPal and later Twitter, and the "trayvoning" meme, illustrate some of the ways hashtags and social media can be used to defend or dismiss injustices even as counterpublics work to resolve them.

Twitter also became a tool to protect Martin's legacy. As Genie Lauren's account shared in the Forward attests, when she

learned that a juror on the Zimmerman case had procured a literary agent to write a tell-all about her experience, Lauren took to Twitter to encourage others to demand the rescinding of the contract. In less than twenty-four hours, Lauren and her network had successfully created enough pressure and negative press that the agent tweeted that the deal was over. This advocacy reflects the diversity of ways in which Twitter became a useful tool in the aftermath of Martin's killing.

Our analysis of the #TrayvonMartin network focuses on the myriad ways that the hashtag was used in the moments before Zimmerman was charged, during his trial, and after his acquittal. We discuss how members of the #TrayvonMartin network made sense of the facts of the case and framed the story with counterpublic narratives that highlighted the epidemics of racial stereotypes, fear, and anti-Black violence that resulted in Martin's death.

Networks and Narratives in the #TrayvonMartin Counterpublic

Between March 10, 2012, and February 15, 2015 (our data collection window), the hashtag #TrayvonMartin appeared in more than three million tweets generated by nearly two million unique users. To render this large network tractable, we limited our analysis to tweets generated by users who were retweeted or mentioned at least once (thus eliminating network isolates) and divided the data into three networks, each corresponding to important milestones in the history of Trayvon Martin's death and the subsequent trial and acquittal of George Zimmerman.

Over the course of the evolution of the hashtag #TrayvonMartin, we identified several notable shifts in discourse and network leadership. While initially the story was framed as a personal one

in an effort to construct Trayvon Martin as a legitimate victim, and African American celebrities and sympathetic mainstream journalists and commentators were centered in the network, eventually the story evolved into one in which the very concepts of legal justice and criminal liability were debated at both the local and national level, and then into a story in which Trayvon Martin became a cipher for larger critiques of widespread anti-Black violence and systemic inequality.

Precharges Network

The *precharges network* includes data from March 10, 2012, a little more than three weeks after Trayvon Martin's death, through April 10, 2012, the day before George Zimmerman was charged with second-degree murder for the shooting. The largest of the three networks in our sample, despite spanning the shortest time frame, the precharges network includes 114,431 tweets generated by 83,588 users connected by 109,070 retweets and mentions in our sample. This precharges time period was characterized by intense and targeted efforts on behalf of the Martin family lawyers and others to publicize Martin's story, including the Change.org petition described above, tweets about Martin by several highly followed celebrities and journalists, and significant press coverage of the incident in the mainstream media.¹¹ We see these efforts reflected in the emergent pretrial network leadership. The top twenty most retweeted accounts included those of Martin's mother, Sybrina Fulton (@SybrinaFulton), the Martin family lawyer, Benjamin Crump (@attorneycrump), the journalist Anderson Cooper (@andersoncooper, @AC360), and Black celebrities, including Gabrielle Union, Taraji P. Henson, Tichina Arnold, and Diddy Combs (@itsgabrielleu, @TherealTaraji, @TachinaArnold, @iamDiddy).

The most retweeted accounts also included several parody accounts that exploited the opportunity for public attention by tweeting false promises of money or political action to garner retweets. Two of these accounts, @RealFerrellWill and @WeLoveTrayvon, were the most retweeted accounts in the pretrial network, collecting a combined total of more than 15,000 retweets over the course of several days in late March 2012. Both promised to donate \$1 to the (at the time nonexistent) #TrayvonMartin Foundation for every retweet received, and as a result, both rapidly gained followers and retweets before Twitter users realized the promises were hoaxes. Although Twitter had a formal policy against such parody accounts and hoax tweets at the time, it was not until 2013 that the platform introduced mechanisms for easily reporting fake accounts and content. This, combined with retweets by highly followed (real) celebrities who did not initially recognize the hoaxes, allowed the accounts to sustain visibility, collecting followers and retweets for some time.

Because of their high number of retweets, these two parody accounts occupy unusually central positions in the network, in this way more closely resembling the accounts of journalists and celebrities (such as @andersoncooper, @TherealTaraji) than other parody accounts, which tend to appear along the periphery of the network. This suggests @RealFarrellWill and @WeLoveTrayvon, despite their disingenuous promises of charitable donations and their eventual suspension and deletion from the platform, may have played an outsized role in popularizing the #TrayvonMartin hashtag and, perhaps, awareness of Martin's death more generally.

The Black celebrities central to this network, the majority of whom were Black women, expressed grief and outrage over Trayvon Martin's death and combined advocacy efforts for justice

in the case with personalized commentary that constructed Martin as an “every kid.” For example, actress Taraji P. Henson tweeted, “I worry about my son!!!! JUSTICE FOR #TrayvonMartin NOW!!!!,” while actress Tichina Arnold, who tweeted daily the number of days that had passed since Trayvon Martin “begged for his young life,” also tweeted, “I Repeat: I WILL NOT let the death of INNOCENT #TrayvonMartin go until #GEORGEZIMMERMAN is brought 2 JUSTICE. That baby was MURDERED 4NOTHING,” and actress Gabrielle Union tweeted, “#TrayvonMartin case has exposed some ppl as monsters ... not just Zimmerman but ANY1 who makes excuses 4 a man who kills an unarmed child.” In such tweets and others shared widely in the network sent by these women, we see Henson, Arnold, and Union using personal and familial appeals, calling Trayvon “baby” and comparing him to family members. Further, Martin’s innocence is continuously reentrenched through language that focuses on his youth (“young life,” “child”), as is the maliciousness of his death, both in descriptions of the individual actions of Zimmerman and in the characterizations of those who sought to defend him (“begged for his life,” “murdered,” “monsters”).

While less central to the network than these Black women celebrities, the rapper-producer Diddy Combs’s tweet sharing the previously discussed Change.org petition was popular in the network, along with a tweet from Real Time HBO host Bill Maher in which the comedian stated, “No probable cause in #TrayvonMartin murder? If a dead unarmed teen and an angry racist with a smoking gun is too subtle a clue, what isn’t?” From the Combs and Maher tweets we see how the network valued both action and outrage in relation to Martin’s murder.

Of note, Combs shared the petition only after ordinary people—noncelebrities—made a concerted effort to draw him

into the network. Dozens of users tweeted messages directly at Combs asking him to use his platform to draw attention to the case, while others accused Combs of failing in his moral duties as a Black star who vacationed in Florida as the Martin family struggled to gain national attention. For example, @BritiniD-Writes tweeted, “Dear @IamDiddy a FL man MURDERED a Black teen named #TrayvonMartin in Feb & still isn’t arrested. RT to get #GeorgeZimmerman arrested!” And @PonderonThat was one of many users who brought the Change.org petition to Combs’s attention, tweeting, “@iamDiddy pls sign &RT the petition to bring #TrayvonMartin’s killer to justice. His family deserves answers <http://chn.ge/xc4oze>.” Many users accused Combs of not caring enough about the case, advising him to “use your fame wisely” and “promote something that matters,” in tweets about Martin. The popularity of tweets directed at Diddy in the network illustrates the evolution of attention to the case whereby ordinary people succeeded in getting high-profile members of the public to broadcast their concerns, furthering the network and reach of the story and gaining more mainstream attention. It is thus clear that while figures like Combs and other celebrities became central to spreading information about the case, they did so at the behest of ordinary people, mostly African American members of an often ignored counterpublic who tweeted at them asking for support and help.

From the popularity of Anderson Cooper in the network we can see how the counterpublic selected which types of mainstream news narratives and frames about anti-Black violence to spread and support. Cooper’s most influential tweet in the pre-trial network read, “What I question is why #TrayvonMartin’s shooter instantly called him ‘suspicious’ and said ‘these a..holes, they always get away.’ @AC360 8p.” Here Cooper reveals his own

suspicion of racial bias, though he avoids naming it explicitly. His second most popular tweet in the network goes even further: “Do you think if #TrayvonMartin had been white would he have been labeled ‘suspicious’? Would his shooter have been arrested? @AC360 8p, 10p.” In this tweet, Cooper calls for reflection and response from his mainstream audience and shares his own perspective, framing the crime against Martin as one based in racial animus while still preserving the luster of objective journalistic inquiry.

It is notable that these two Cooper tweets were most frequently shared and responded to in the network, for Cooper also tweeted several tweets during the same time frame that received less attention and interaction. These included a tweet in which the anchor rephrased his initial reaction as a rhetorical question that did more discursive avoidance of blame attribution: “The shooting of #TrayvonMartin. Unarmed african-american teen. Was race the reason he was labeled suspicious by shooter? @AC360 8p, 10p,” and a tweet sent one week later that focused on Zimmerman’s version of the story: “Just interviewed #trayvonmartin’s shooter’s attorney. He says race was not a factor in George Zimmerman killing Martin. @AC360 8p, 10p.” Notably, the latter tweet received only about one-tenth the response of Cooper’s first-person, “What I question ...” tweet, reflecting the prioritizing in the network of news narratives that legitimized Martin’s victimhood and connected it directly to racism. Also notable is that while the first two tweets reproduced here were largely shared (by retweets) and responded to (by replies) affirmatively in the network, the responses to and shares of the last two tweets were often corrections or proclamations re-centering racism as a cause for the crime against Martin and casting disperson on the Zimmerman team. For example, users quoted

Cooper's last two tweets and followed up with their own exclamations, such as the snarky "of course!" and "of course he did, he was paid to!"

Trial Network

The next network we examine, the *trial network*, comprised nearly 70,000 tweets in our sample, sent by 37,588 users connected by 62,740 retweets and mentions. These tweets were sent during the year-plus that elapsed from the day George Zimmerman was charged with second-degree murder (April 11, 2012) through the day he was acquitted of all charges related to Trayvon Martin's death (July 13, 2013). Relatively smaller in size than the networks covering the time periods before and after the trial, the trial network—perhaps predictably—is dominated by accounts tweeting from and about Zimmerman's trial. The most popular account, with nearly twice the retweets and mentions of any other account in the network, belonged to Jeff Weiner, a central Florida journalist who live-tweeted the trial from inside the courtroom (@JeffWeinerOS, with 2,094 retweets and mentions). The next most retweeted and mentioned accounts were those of Robert Zimmerman, George Zimmerman's brother and family spokesperson (@rzimmermanjr, 1,292 retweets and mentions), and Benjamin Crump, the lawyer representing Trayvon Martin's family (@AttorneyCrump, 807 retweets and mentions). Although neither had formal roles in the trial proceedings, both Zimmerman and Crump commented on the trial frequently on Twitter and other media platforms. Other highly retweeted accounts discussing the trial included those of Black celebrities (such as Gabrielle Union, @itsgabrielleu, 551 retweets and mentions) and the Black media outlets BET and BET News (@BET and @BETNews, 387 and 451 retweets and mentions, respectively).

In addition to these accounts discussing the Zimmerman trial, the trial network also includes bots and other opportunistic accounts that exploited public interest in the trial to make money or promote products. For example, similar to the @RealFerrell-Will and @WeLoveTrayvon accounts described above, a parody account masquerading as that of actor Will Smith (@realWill-Smith) received more than five hundred retweets in exchange for promised financial donations to the (fictional) #TrayvonMartin Foundation. However, unlike the similar accounts in the pre-trial network, the @realWillSmith donation-for-retweet promise was extremely short-lived, lasting only hours, compared to several days for the accounts that trended in the pretrial network. This suggests that users became relatively more savvy over time about identifying hoaxes, and consequently hoax accounts were less influential in the discourse during the trial network than they were previously.

In this period, the fact that only one Black celebrity, Gabrielle Union, held on to a top spot in the network shows that rather than spreading tweets from high-profile figures seeking to draw attention to the case, the network centered news about the legal case, particularly the ins and outs of the charges and trial, as well as the competing narratives coming from the Martin and Zimmerman camps. This is clearly illustrated by the top three accounts in the trial network, those of Jeff Weiner, an *Orlando Sentinel* reporter, who covered the trail from the ground at the local level; Robert Zimmerman, George Zimmerman's brother and the family spokesman, who primarily appeared in the network as the result of replies from various users challenging his public assertions about the case and trial and denigrating him and his brother; and Benjamin Crump, the Martin family attorney who

became central to the network as a result of retweets as other users shared his updates on the case and the general status of the Martin family. The difference in the kinds of engagement that made Robert Zimmerman and Benjamin Crump central to the network reveals the importance of looking beyond network data to the ways that publics and counterpublics use the technological tools available to them to elevate or challenge particular discourses.

Crump's tweets like "For all asking here is the link to last week Motion and Court Transcript #TrayvonMartin" (which included several lengthy links to said documents) and "Be sure to follow the #TrayvonMartin legal team to stay abreast [sic] on all case updates. @NatJackEsq @parksesq and @JasmineEsquire" were retweeted widely in the network. Robert Zimmerman appears in the network because of all the @ replies he received as direct challenges to his contentions about his brother and the story of what happened the night of Martin's death. In response to a tweet that received less than ten retweets in which Robert Zimmerman said, "Commemorate #TrayvonMartin NE way U like, but don't slander my brother #GeorgeZimmerman in the process," dozens of members of the #TrayvonMartin network responded with critiques of the logic of the tweet, critiques of Zimmerman's general defense of his brother, and pure outrage at the circumstances of Martin's death. Responses to the Robert Zimmerman's tweet ranged from "@rzimmermanjr slander? Really?..everytime you speak you r slandering a young man who can no longer speak TRUTH. Murder is murder" to "@rzimmermanjr The Zimmermans think only they have the right to voice their opinions ..." and "@rzimmermanjr Man Fuck your brother!" Here we see the interventionist counternarratives that arose from the network

in response to the presentation of Zimmerman's defense, as well as the outrage in the network directed at Zimmerman generally.

Journalist Jeff Weiner, the most central node in the trial network, maintained this position through his dogged reporting on the case and trial and his frequent posts. Notably, Weiner has a fairly modest following on Twitter but was elevated in this network owing to his close proximity and access to the case. For example, Weiner frequently tweeted breaking updates about the legal proceeding and statements made by both the Zimmerman defense team and the Martin family team, along with comments from the judge overseeing the case. Examples of Weiner tweets that circulated widely in the network include "Natalie Jackson: 'A Black 17-year-old child should be able to walk home from the store & not be shot.' #TrayvonMartin" and "Guy: #TrayvonMartin died after experiencing child's worst fear: 'to be followed on the way home in the dark by a stranger.' #ZimmermanTrial."¹² The popularity of these tweets in the network show how news reporting that amplified the arguments being made by members of the prosecution were favored over those made by Zimmerman's defense team—which Weiner spent equal time reporting on, but which received far fewer retweets.

The trial network also included BET News and BET accounts, which became central to the network for reporting on the case. Notably, while BET is an entertainment, not news, channel, it is the only cable or broadcast network to appear in a dominant position in the trial network, revealing the sourcing preferences of the network during this period and a desire for news about the case that openly contextualized Martin within Black experiences with anti-Black violence and the criminal justice system. @BETNews reported details of the trial in the form of direct quotations from the prosecution against Zimmerman that tended to

center Martin's innocence and cast doubt on Zimmerman's version of events, occasionally using all caps to emphasize parts the reporter found important. @BET also frequently tweeted about the inner workings of the trial but included reports on Martin's family "asking for prayers," tweets that highlighted inconsistencies in the way police handled Martin's death, and comparisons of Martin's death to that of Jordan Davis, the Black teen killed the same year as Martin by a white man after a dispute over loud music in a gas station parking lot.

Posttrial Network

The final network in our analysis, the *posttrial network*, includes tweets sent between July 14, 2013, the day after Zimmerman was acquitted, and February 15, 2015, the end of the data collection window for this chapter. This eighteen-month period allows us to examine themes that emerged immediately after Zimmerman's acquittal, as well as those that surfaced after the initial media frenzy over the verdict dissipated. The posttrial network includes 85,914 tweets sent by 61,620 unique users connected by 79,627 retweets and mentions. Approximately three quarters of the tweets in the posttrial network were sent in the days immediately following Zimmerman's acquittal as advocacy organizations like the NAACP, Black media outlets, and celebrities like Rihanna commented on the verdict, subsequent protests, and ongoing legal action against Zimmerman.

Following this initial surge of activity, there was a small uptick in tweets containing #TrayvonMartin when then president Barack Obama spoke about Trayvon Martin and racial profiling in a White House press briefing. Although President Obama himself never tweeted about Trayvon Martin, on July 19, 2013, his remarks about Martin were heavily quoted and linked

by other Twitter users. These tweets, along with ongoing commentary about the Zimmerman verdict, yielded several thousand tweets per day, in our sample, until the end of July 2013, when the pace slowed to between several dozen and around one hundred tweets per day.

Tweets containing #TrayvonMartin continued to appear at a rate of approximately thirty to one hundred per day until the following February, when several thousand tweets appeared on February 5, 2014, the day that would have been Trayvon Martin's nineteenth birthday. The #TrayvonMartin hashtag continues to trend each year on Martin's birthday, as well as on the anniversary of the day he was killed. Apart from these dates related to Martin's life and death, the #TrayvonMartin hashtag also trends during other events involving the extrajudicial killing of Black men and boys, including the August 2014 protests following the death of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri; the November 2014 protests following the death of Tamir Rice; and the December 2014 protests following the failure to indict the police officers involved in the deaths of Michael Brown and Eric Garner (we discuss these cases in the next chapter). Thus, over time, the hashtag #TrayvonMartin both reflects an ongoing commitment to honor the life and memory of Trayvon Martin himself and references a larger pattern of systemic injustice across the United States. Here we see a shift away from the individualized framing of Martin as child victim popular in the pretrial network and the legal details that were of interest in the trial network. Instead, Martin's victimhood becomes a cipher for the larger experience of injustice among Black people, particularly that involving anti-Black violence, state-sanctioned violence, and neglect and abuses within the legal system. In the posttrial network Martin's case is most frequently connected, through

co-occurring hashtags, to cases of police brutality. In this discourse, although Zimmerman was not an officer of the law, users make the connection between the ideologies that support community watch initiatives and the criminalization of Black men generally, and name the complicity and guilt of police and courts in protecting not only each other but white vigilantes who use similar logics.

In this network we also see the rise of established advocacy groups to a central position including the NAACP and members of its board, and the hacker collective Anonymous. Though the NAACP, which is a legacy Black civil rights organization, and Anonymous, which at the time was one of the most followed radical activist accounts across different issue areas, may seem like strange bedfellows, here they both serve to communicate the all too common miscarriage of justice that the Zimmerman acquittal reflected.¹³ On the day of the acquittal, for example, Anonymous tweeted, “No Justice for #TrayvonMartin. Not today,” and the NAACP tweeted a quote from the organization’s chair, Roslyn Brock, that read “Today, justice failed #TrayvonMartin and his family.” Both tweets reflect the deep disappointment and anger felt in counterpublic communities regarding the Zimmerman verdict. The NAACP followed up on its first tweet with an actionable one, asking those in the network to continue to “seek justice for #TrayvonMartin” by signing a petition asking for a Department of Justice inquiry, while @YourAnonNews levied a critique of the trial, tweeting “#TrayvonMartin was put on trial, in effect, for his own murder and found guilty,” while also sharing the Trayvon Martin tribute song released by Yasiin Bey, Dead Prez, and Mikeflo.

Also, in the posttrial network we see some carryover in types of popular accounts from previous periods. While the original

group of Black celebrities central to the pretrial network are no longer influential here, they have been replaced in the posttrial network by singer Rihanna, producer NatStar, and BET's *106 & Park*, a live studio audience music video show in which hosts Terrence J and Roci Diaz discussed pop culture and news. Notably, this set of Black celebrity influencers is markedly younger than those that appeared in the pretrial network. While Generation X Black celebrity discourse in the pretrial network advocated for the justice system in a hopeful way that presumed it could serve Trayvon Martin's family justice, these millennial Black celebrity accounts contributed to a discourse in the posttrial network that framed the justice system itself as impossibly corrupt and unable to value Black lives appropriately.

On the day after the acquittal, for example, Rihanna's short tweet "Only in America! #TrayvonMartin" became enormously popular, the exclamation of exasperation and critique of the U.S. system as a whole resonating with members of the network. After the acquittal was announced, @106andPark began tweeting images of, and details about, the spontaneous protests occurring in response to the verdict in Times Square and other U.S. cities, ways for those who disagreed with the verdict to take action, and asked followers to "Tweet with us your reactions of the #ZimmermanTrial's verdict using #106ForTrayvon today as we discuss #TrayvonMartin w/ experts." The show dedicated an episode to Martin two days after the verdict in which it live-tweeted the reactions of hip hop stars like Young Jeezy to the verdict. NatStar released a song titled "Eureka" on SoundCloud that included a verse about Martin and was subsequently praised and retweeted in the network by NAACP board member Wanda Brendle-Moss in a show of intergenerational solidarity.

One account not like the others in content made it into a position of influence in the posttrial network. The user shared a meme suggesting that white victims of Black killers receive less media and legal attention than Black victims of white killers like Trayvon Martin. The meme does not delegitimize Martin's victimhood directly, noting that he was unarmed and seventeen, but suggests that a white teen named Marley Lion met a similar fate and unfairly received no outcry or attention. The meme, which reflects the now widely discussed use of misinformation and misdirection online, lacks facts and accurate reporting—as is true of many narratives that arise online seeking to prove reverse racism or suggesting that crimes committed by Black perpetrators against whites are ignored.¹⁴ Snopes, the crowd-sourced fact-checking site, quickly pointed out the false equivalencies in the meme, noting that in the Lion case the victim was not targeted for his identity or for “looking suspicious” but was robbed, the perpetrators were initially unknown, and as soon as law enforcement identified the perpetrators, which was swiftly, they were arrested, charged, tried, and found guilty. Regardless, this user's centrality in the network is due solely to this meme, reflecting two responses to his tweet: first, some users, those who believed the Martin case was overblown and who were largely excluded from positions of influence in the pretrial and trial networks, used the meme to interject an alternative, dismissive narrative into the posttrial network, and second, members of the network who understood the unique injustices of the Martin case responded to the meme through a large number of replies in an effort to illustrate the false equivalency. These battling narratives elevated the single tweet to a position of prominence.

Setting the Stage for Black Lives Matter

From the death of Oscar Grant to the killing of Trayvon Martin, counterpublics, activists, and concerned citizens engaged digital technology in the long tradition of elevating untold stories and unfair conditions faced by African Americans. Here we see an ecosystem that includes not just Twitter but YouTube, online petition sites, and online and offline efforts to gain the attention of journalists and celebrities and to disrupt the business as usual narratives and spaces that normalize anti-Black violence. Within the #TrayvonMartin network, we can trace the way users respond to discourse that supports or diminishes the severity of this violence and the important role of narrative whereby hashtags are linked together to contextualize, memorialize, and make demands.

For example, in addition to the network data described above, we also captured a ranked list of the most common hashtags appearing in tweets with #TrayvonMartin during our data collection window. Here we extended the collection of tweets from the beginning of the Martin story's visibility through the years following Zimmerman's acquittal. Co-occurrence helps us tell the story of how members of the #TrayvonMartin network understood Martin's killing in relation to other stories they deemed important both at the time and in the following years. Variations on George Zimmerman's name (#Zimmerman, #GeorgeZimmerman) appeared most frequently and earliest, followed by the names of other African Americans killed by police and vigilantes. Taken together with the trend data observed in the posttrial network, this lends further support to the notion that #TrayvonMartin transformed over time from a signifier of Martin himself to a symbol of the broader condition of racial

bias and injustice in America. Indeed, the twenty most commonly co-occurring hashtags also include calls for justice for Martin in particular (#JusticeForTrayvon) and the Black community in general (#BlackLivesMatter).

The ongoing visibility of the hashtag on Twitter is an example of how the narratives constructed by particular publics are lasting and how particular stories carry symbolic weight even when the events lie in the past. We see this in how the story was linked, in particular, to other cases of anti-Black violence that occurred both before and after Martin's killing. Of the top one hundred co-occurring hashtag combinations, more than half, fifty-five, included the names of other African Americans killed by police violence or by white Americans. The names were those of other children, including Tamir Rice and Jordan Davis, and many men and women, including, most frequently, Michael Brown and Eric Garner, whose killings at the hands of police happened almost exactly one year after George Zimmerman's acquittal.

Remarkably, after Rice, Davis, Brown, and Garner, #OscarGrant is the next most frequently hashtagged name beside #TrayvonMartin. We mark the digital documentation and activism around Grant's January 2009 killing by Bay Area Rapid Transit police as a starting point for contemporary digital racial justice organizing. The linking of the Grant case to the Martin case despite intervening time and events reflects this connection. For example, the journalist and activist Abby Martin tweeted a week after the killing of Mike Brown, "Just like #TrayvonMartin & #OscarGrant, the media protects the status quo by framing #MikeBrown as the criminal, instead of the killer cop."

Notably, other historical cases of anti-Black murder are hashtagged next to #TrayvonMartin as well, including #SeanBell and #EmmettTill. The linking of these cases, which span nearly

sixty years, also indicates the role that collective memory plays in contemporary digital racial justice spaces. For example, user @MikeMooseBC tweeted a link to his personal YouTube channel to Rihanna, saying, “I filmed a webisode featuring #TrayvonMartin #EmmettTill #HipHop & Id LOVE ur opinion if U have time,” and the account for the TV One program *Roland Reports* featuring columnist Roland Martin tweeted “DON’T MISS @rolandmartin’s NEW column, #TrayvonMartin Could Be This Generation’s #EmmettTill.”

Together, members of the #TrayvonMartin network argue that the fate that befell Martin, Till, and those in between reflects the glaring continuation of anti-Black violence and supremacy. Further, this linkage is used to make the point that little has changed in the treatment of Black bodies in U.S. society despite the supposed racial advances of post-civil rights America. Here we see the ways Twitter users and their networks concerned with ongoing instances of anti-Black violence locate themselves within larger histories of the Black freedom struggle and activism.

The frequency with which the hashtag #MarissaAlexander appeared alongside #TrayvonMartin further demonstrates the systemic critique levied by members of the network. The same year that Martin was killed, Alexander, a Black woman, fired a warning shot to scare away her abusive husband in Florida. Despite the Florida “stand your ground” law that Zimmerman’s defense successfully used, Alexander was found guilty of aggravated assault with a lethal weapon and sentenced to twenty years in prison. The juxtaposition of the treatment of Alexander, who had been physically threatened by her husband and who physically hurt no one, with that of Zimmerman was used in the network to point out the inconsistent ways in which laws are applied to Black and white victims and defendants.

Other names co-occurring with #Trayvon Martin include #RenishaMcBride, #FreddieGray, #WalterScott, #Kendrick-Johnson, #JohnCrawford, #AntonioMartin, and #RekiaBoyd. Together these hashtags work within the network to highlight a systemic problem that results in the unnecessary, frequent, and barbaric deaths of Black Americans. Together they make a case for a movement for Black lives.

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#HashtagActivism

Networks of Race and Gender Justice

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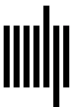
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