THE GHOSTS OF WHITE SUPREMACY: 
TRAYVON MARTIN, MICHAEL BROWN, AND THE SPECTERS OF 
BLACK CRIMINALITY

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I. INTRODUCTION

We are haunted by the specters of white supremacy conveniently masked in the avatar of black criminality.\(^1\) Racism is real and structural.\(^2\) Criminal law has a disparate effect on people of color.\(^3\) Workplace discrimination is real.\(^4\) White society’s dominant strategy for addressing

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1 See KILLING TRAYVONS: AN ANTHOLOGY OF AMERICAN VIOLENCE (Kevin Alexander Gray et al. eds., 2014).


blackness is violence.\(^5\) Or, as Joseph Pugliese has written, “White supremacy is a priori the exercise of violence through the diffuse iteration of everyday practices that, precisely because of their quotidian status, render the violence unrepresentable to everyone but its targets.”\(^6\) We cannot expect whiteness\(^7\) to self-correct; it never has. We as scholars, lawyers, and activists must challenge dominant discourses that displace, obscure, and obfuscate the centrality of whiteness in our everyday lives. Whiteness is strategic, used at will to denigrate, debase, and other blackness.\(^8\) Ghosts are at war. The ghosts of white supremacy walk the realm of the living masked in the trappings of post-racialism.\(^9\) We heed the drum beat of spectral violence every time we remain silent. Silence is whiteness’s strategy.

In this short essay, I am interested in unpacking the ways in which black criminality haunts United States law as white supremacy’s avatar. For some time, I have been interested in hauntings\(^10\) both for the vivid imagery they encourage, and of course the interest such imagery generates, as well as the way such a description gets at the presence/absence conundrum of a post-everything world.\(^11\) That is to say, although post-racialism has roundly been critiqued in the legal academy, it is a salient feature of everyday discourse. So, in light of this, legal scholars and other interested parties must consider the ways in which the ghosts of white supremacy structure modern concepts of black criminality. And, also, the ways our responses to anti-blackness must be structured in order to address white supremacy’s spectral existence. These ghosts flitter about in the recesses, corners, and alleyways of public memory and discourse. But we often forget the important ways the past is made present,
particularly in terms of race relations. What we need do is look\textsuperscript{12} awry\textsuperscript{13} in order to see the ghosts not in front of us. Looking awry is, of course, the way Slavoj Žižek suggests we might be able to confront from the side, askew, our objects of study to better apprehend them in light of their refractal possibilities.

To wit, I contend white supremacy is a ghostly regime of intolerance that serves as the justification for police violence and enables structural inequality. I also contend that the ghosts of white supremacy must be addressed, must be confronted, no matter how fleeting and ineffectual such psychic engagement may be. Such engagements are fraught with difficulty and disappointment, but unless we explore the deep recesses of our minds with unflagging critical attention, we are destined to let white supremacy haunt our attempts at racial understanding, our desire to better understand difference, and our interest in equality.

Law is ineffective in dealing with racial injustice. Recent discussions about the ineffectual nature of \textit{Brown v. Board of Education} bear this out.\textsuperscript{14} Racism remains central to sports, media, law, and civil society.\textsuperscript{15} Law cannot be our answer, not because law, judges, and lawyers do bad things, but because law asks that we displace hope into someone else’s hands. Only through hope can we attempt to challenge white supremacy, but that hope only matters in a world where we appreciate the hauntings that guide our everyday actions.

In this Article, I begin with an explanation of haunting’s role in law, followed by a discussion of blackness’s visuality. To this, I add a discussion of negative dialectics as a more helpful way to engage the dialectical nature of race and a discussion of the possibilities of hope as an answer to law’s anti-blackness. Each section is intended to be an avenue from which to critique anti-blackness in law, and to then take the next step of challenging white supremacy and anti-blackness.

\textsuperscript{12} I do not mean “look” or “see” in the ablest sense, but instead in the critically engaging sense. Looking and seeing need not occur with eyes. If eyes are all we use to look and see, we are missing quite a lot.


II. A HAUNTOLOGY OF THE CRIMINAL

For some time, we have feared criminals, fearing what they do and fearing the fear they inspire. Television, motion pictures, and newspapers trade in crime stories, fictionalized and more factual, all to capture our attention in the economy of spectral images. We desire to see the ghost, to be able to prove it is out there. But, it is precisely the unreachable ghost that motivates us, that beckons us toward the unknowable. In some ways then, white supremacy's spectral nature is the precondition for its investigation and challenging. White supremacy can be challenged particularly because it cannot be. This is to make complex a relatively simple idea: unknowns can invigorate resistance.

We watch ghost hunting shows on television, impressed and raptured by the sudden changes in readings on EMF (electromagnetic field) readers. We love the known unknowns of Halloween, an unlit house, and the plot twist not yet read. We hope to be able to guess the killer or find the killer's hideout. Surprise! The killer is already inside the house. The same is true of our legal system; it is not that outside actors have constructed something that bears little resemblance to the idyllic democratic experiment of the Founding Era. No. Instead, we should direct our attention at judges, lawyers, prosecutors, and police officers. A police officer killed Eric Garner. A police officer killed


Michael Brown. A wannabe police officer who was unable to get hired by a police force killed Trayvon Martin. This is evil within the system. This is living, breathing anti-blackness. We risk pushing anti-blackness outside the systems in structures at our own peril. The ghosts of white supremacy are powerful.

It makes sense, then, that we ought to be intrigued by black criminality because it is precisely this sort of logic that drives so many to consider such a misleading spectral image. We do not fear specific criminals or specific black persons. That would put (un)rationality above reason, and in today’s political climate, the last thing we want to consider is reason. What we fear is our love of the known unknowns. Think for a minute of Halloween and the fear the grotesque masks inspire. We fear these masks, the avatars affixed by rubber band to the fearfulfulness of the unseen origin. It is not that the masks are truly our fear, but what they expose about the madness of those who wear masks. So then, it is my contention that we fear black criminality precisely because it casts a sideways glance at the fear we have of white supremacy. In the fear of black criminality we are confronted with the unspoken fear of white supremacy. Because this unspoken energy exists, I draw hope in a world structured by anti-blackness. It is as if the psychoanalyst has said to the analysand, “You only need fear the way you mask over those feelings you have and not the feelings you have masked.” Sure enough, but what lays under the mask is far more frightening. When seen sideways, the problem may be better realized.

Of course, I am not naïve enough to think that reason, in its Enlightenment velour sweatsuit of privilege, will save the day. Quite the opposite. Nor do I think a few crafty psychoanalytic explorations will unveil anti-blackness to whites. But I do harbor a belief that with a little more thinking, a little more critical reflection, and a little more reflexivity, we might be better able to address the issue of black criminality’s Other because a call

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21 An analysand is a person undergoing psychoanalysis.

22 DYLAN EVANS, *AN INTRODUCTORY DICTIONARY OF LACANIAN PSYCHOANALYSIS* 133 (1996) (“Lacan equates this radical alterity with language and the law, and hence the big Other is inscribed in the order of the symbolic. Indeed, the big Other is the symbolic insofar as it is
to challenge anti-blackness is not enough. A call to reject whiteness is not enough. What is needed far more, what can save lives, is a complex engagement with these ideas in total. What we need to think about most is the ways in which law presents superficial problems to mask deeper structural inequalities.

My argument is not that crime is good, or the reductive argument that no black person can commit a crime. Nonetheless, I become increasingly weary of criminality regimes that seem to stack the deck against identity categories because it is precisely that rigidity and recourse to otherization that justifies the genocidal consensus of despots and generals. I do not contend that crime, whatever that means, is something to not be feared. Nor do I contend that whiteness looks the same in every instance or that all white people are to blame. Broad strokes may make articles shorter, but they do not solve life and death problems like police violence, employment discrimination, and counterterrorism.

I do contend black criminality is a ghostly regime of intolerance and the justification for police violence and an enabler of structural inequality. What we are dealing with is the unseen and unrealized. Put more concretely, policy makers, lawyers, and legal scholars must think about the ways the past remains chained to the present in order to best appreciate the reasons for criminality and the construction of law. We can continue to displace blame, push it away from legal structures and actors if we wish to never solve or even adequately address anti-blackness. We should want more; we should want to do better.

Ian Baucom’s masterful work draws precisely on these connections to explain the ways in which slavery haunts race relations presently.23 It is not that the chains of slavery have been broken, but that they have merely become spectral, ever-present but never fully seen.24 It is not that slavery presents itself at every turn, but that it lurks insidiously in a world shackled by anti-blackness.

In this way, history becomes important because it informs the present, shapes policy decisions, and reifies ideology. Students of law should be

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students of history. Why is it so uncommon to hear about the Zong Massacre, Stono Rebellion, or George Jackson in law school? History should inform the way we organize ourselves. We’ve lost our connection to struggles of yesteryear. We’re allowing the ghosts of white supremacy to take the upper hand.

We might draw on this hauntology to suggest a spectral basis for Frank Wilderson’s argument that civil society is structured as anti-black, governed by the politics of anti-blackness. When Wilderson writes of blacks being barred from civil society, his arguments rest upon a spectral economy run by a history of anti-blackness ever present in lived reality. It is not that civil society is constructed by overt anti-blackness, although this is surely a key feature in civil society, but that the structure of civil society rests upon specters of fear and otherization that are so firmly believed, so ephemeral as to not be seen, that they structure the phenomenological psychology of everyday life.

Following in this vein, Charles W. Mills suggests, “White supremacy is the unnamed political system that has made the modern world what it is today.” But, Mills and Wilderson differ, seemingly, about the nature of white supremacy; Mills understands it as epistemological whereas Wilderson understands it as ontological. That distinction is problematic, but a discussion


26 See generally James Walvin, The Zong: A Massacre, the Law and the End of Slavery (2011); Paula Morgan, Re-membering Our Scattered Skeletons: Inscribing the Zong Massacre in Caribbean Literature, 1 Lucayos 60 (2008), available at http://www.cobses.info/ojs/index.php?journal=lucayos&page=article&op=viewFile&path%5B%5D=6&path%5B%5D=6.


28 George Jackson was the founder of the Black Guerilla Family and a major force in black radicalism. See generally George Jackson, Soledad Brother (1970); George Jackson, Blood in My Eye (1971); Heather Gray, The Legacy of the Stono Rebellion, CounterPunch.org, (Sept. 9, 2014), http://www.counterpunch.org/2014/09/09/the-legacy-of-the-stono-rebellion/.

29 Frank Wilderson, III, Gramsci’s Black Marx: Whither the Slave in Civil Society?, 9 Soc. Identities 225, 231–33 (2003). (“I submit that death of the black body is (a) foundational to the life of American civil society (just as foundational as it is to the drama of value—wage slavery), and (b) foundational to the fantasy space of desires which underwrite the industrialist’s hegemony and which underwrite the worker’s potential for, and realisation of, what Gramsci calls ‘good sense’.” Id. at 233. (emphasis in original)).

30 Id. at 233.

of that distinction would distract us from the importance of white supremacy’s hauntings now.

Indeed it is our failure to recognize the ways in which ghosts are at work in our policy decisions and civic engagements that structures the failures of the legal system. We fail to look awry. We should be afraid, to paraphrase Immortal Technique, of the racists we don’t see, not the racists we see. It is easy to spot a Klansman or a neo-Nazi, it is easy to spot racially coded rhetoric in tough-on-crime legislation, but it is not easy to spot ghosts we fail to acknowledge. There is a disjuncture here because we strive steadfastly for change to fight the racism we see in institutions, but what we ought to be doing is working better to challenge the unspoken, unseen, unacknowledged racism that permeates U.S. law.

If we take Plessy v. Ferguson as the starting point for modern discussions about race and law, as some sort of fracture with racism that not simply enshrined anti-blackness, but more clearly enshrined white supremacy, then we should agree with Derrick Bell who has noted, “Plessy’s simplistic ‘separate but equal’ form served as a legal adhesive in the consolidation of white supremacy in America.” Plessy certainly did mark an important concretization of white supremacy in law, which would shape law well through Brown v. Board of Education. If we are to do right by Trayvon, Michael, Eric, and countless others who were not mentioned by the media, we must acknowledge the influence of white supremacy on our everyday lives. It is not enough to confront the racists we know.

32 IMMORTAL TECHNIQUE, The Poverty of Philosophy, on Revolutionary, Volume 1 (Viper Records 2001) (“My enemy is not the average white man. It’s not the kid down the block or the kids I see on the street. My enemy is the white man I don’t see: the people in the White House, the corporate monopoly owners, fake liberal politicians; those are my enemies.”).


35 163 U.S. 537 (1896).


III. BLACK LETTER LAW’S PHOTOGRAPHIC NEGATIVE

Black letter law should be read as the photographic negative, for it is black letter law that imposes white supremacy in black script. It is this oppressive rescripting of white supremacy as neutral that allows white supremacy to flourish in the neutral arena of black letter law. Careful students of the law should read the photographic negative though, instead of assuming the neutrality of law’s scripting. What I mean here is that there is a tendency to read law as it is, under the pressure of bar passage, job prospects, project deadlines, and efficiency—all the logics of late-stage capitalism. As opposed to this, in opposition to the liberal reading of law as it is with perhaps a modest critique here and there, students of the law should radically critique law through the oppositional strategy of reading the photographic negative.

This play with vision harkens back to the centrality of the photographic image in the Civil Rights Movement. The negative dialectic of reading the law in reverse demands a realization that law is constructed by its absolute non-neutrality. Calling on Theodor Adorno, I see the negative dialectic of producing not some affirming synthesis, but some deformed crisis, a necessary step in grasping law’s structural racism. It is, in essence, law’s lack of objectivity that makes law’s supposed objectivity the profession’s closest-held and best-protected secret. By opening up the field of play through negative dialectics, legal scholars may better understand racism as contingent, ephemeral, spectral, free-forming, and open to re-writing both by the agents of white supremacy, and those subject to its spectral influence.

One of the dangers of doing race work, thinking about race, engaging race in one’s social justice activism is the tendency to think about race in relatively rigid ways. This becomes a traditional dialectical move that assumes a battling of static forces to produce a static synthesis. Opposed to that, I see a world of negative dialectics as offering a more nuanced view of race and justice, one that neither rests on outdated notions of blackness and whiteness nor totally obscures itself with relativism. The photographic negative metaphor is another way to think about acknowledging white supremacy through looking awry.

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39 Negative does not mean the opposite of positive. Instead it means the rejection of the determinism inherent in Hegel’s dialectic, and Marx’s study of Hegel. Negative dialectics open up the field of play to indeterminacy and contingency, producing a dialectic that does not drive toward an almost pre-configured synthesis, but instead opens up to a plethora of possibilities.


IV. HOPE, NOT PESSIMISM, AND SURELY NOT OPTIMISM

In order to better understand the ramifications of this spectral account of law, one must understand that my political project is hope. Attempting to see the unseeable, speak the unspeakable, and think the unthinkable is a logic designed to confront. In desperate times, where white supremacy slips through our fingers save for a few tugs at the ghost’s tattered rags, what legal scholars must do is engage in politics of hope, because hope sustains a critical orientation to the world. Even if civil society is anti-black, and anti-blackness would seem to prevent black political engagement, the answer is hope and not radical negativity, which can only reproduce the character of negativity attributed to blacks by whites. This is to say, the more radical disjunction is to confront white negativity with black hope. Keep in mind Ernst Bloch’s famous statement, “We must believe in the Principle of Hope. A Marxist does not have the right to be a pessimist.”42 But, it is not just a Marxist that cannot be a pessimist, it is also a critical race theorist, a black radical, a labor organizer, a student protestor. Bloch wrote at a time when hope might seem preposterous, when hope was in short supply, yet his vision for hope motivated the Frankfort School to care deeply about ethics and well-being throughout the World Wars and later.43

While our hauntings may be cause for concern, while they may inspire in us anything but hope, a consistent critical stance against white supremacy requires just the hope Bloch described. In order to do that, we must do more lawyering, more speaking, more writing, more marching, and more learning. White supremacy’s proponents are busy at this work. Challenging anti-blackness requires the same. Negativity or disengagement cannot sustain struggle. Far from Nietzsche’s positive politics of negation, which have their place, what we need now is an orientation toward hope. Let that be the strategy, even if we may quibble about tactics.

V. CONCLUSION

Nat Turner haunts us.44 Gabriel Prosser haunts us.45 Medgar Evers46 and Emmett Till47 haunt us. Trayvon Martin haunts us.48 Michael Brown haunts

us. Eric Garner haunts us. What haunts us more is the specter of white supremacy that enabled these tragic events. In order to engage a world structured by anti-blackness, to engage a legal system that seems determined through many of its most important actors to attack, disempower, and disenfranchise people of color, to engage a political system built on a foundation of dead black bodies, we must, with nary a bat of the eye, ask what are we to do with the ghosts of white supremacy? We must ask this question not because there is one answer, not because the solution is easy, not because the end is near, but instead precisely because the end is far. We are a long way from justice. We are a long way from peace. We are a long way from recognizing our connections to each other, to our role in the struggle for equality and the ways in which we hinder that struggle’s success. The ghosts


51 See Jared Sexton, The Social Life of Social Death: On Afro-Pessimism and Black Optimism, INTENSIONS J., Fall/Winter 2011, at 1, 34.

52 Here I am reminded of Martin Luther King, Jr.’s Nobel Peace Prize Speech where he said, The problem is far from solved. We still have a long, long way to go before the dream of freedom is a reality for the Negro in the United States. To put it
of white supremacy must be addressed, must be confronted, no matter how fleeting and ineffectual such psychic engagement may be. Trying is the redress to pessimism’s affront to an ethic of hope.

figuratively in biblical language, we have left the dusty soils of Egypt and crossed a Red Sea whose waters had for years been hardened by a long and piercing winter of massive resistance. But before we reach the majestic shores of the Promised Land, there is a frustrating and bewildering wilderness ahead.


53 See generally Sexton, supra note 51.