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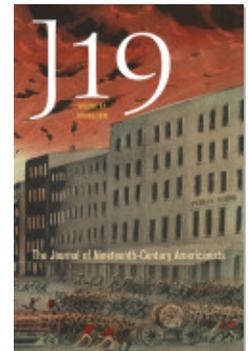
The End of Reconstruction, Again: Dylann Roof, Thomas Dixon Jr., and the Transhistorical Structures of Racist Feeling

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7. Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*, 133; Sharon Patricia Holland, *The Erotic Life of Racism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 7.

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9. Thanks to Brigitte Fielder for raising this issue during the 2016 MLA panel. The first citation of the term in the Oxford English Dictionary is dated 1903; the next is dated 1926.

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## The End of Reconstruction, Again: Dylann Roof, Thomas Dixon Jr., and the Transhistorical Structures of Racist Feeling

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On the night of Barack Obama’s election to the presidency, the New York *Times* columnist Thomas Friedman expressed an understandable hopefulness about the future of race relations. “Breaking with our racial past,” he predicted, would be the “least” of our problems. Friedman closed his column with words that bridged the troubled past and the hopeful future. “The Civil War is over,” he wrote. “*Let reconstruction begin.*”<sup>1</sup> Yet by invoking the Civil War and Reconstruction,

Friedman identified a more complicated history than he may have intended. Reconstruction had been a political experiment, conducted between 1865 and 1877, in which the Congress of the United States attempted to enforce legal and civic equality across race in the former Confederate states. For a brief moment, it seemed to work. By 1887, for instance, seventeen African Americans had been elected or appointed to Congress.<sup>2</sup> But according to observers as diverse as William Dunning and W. E. B. Du Bois, the experiment failed.<sup>3</sup> Thousands were lynched as multi-racial city, county, and state governments were overthrown in white supremacist coups d'état.<sup>4</sup> The United States would witness a century of de jure racial apartheid, followed by the lingering de facto segregation of today. Like the civil rights era (1948–1970), Reconstruction constituted what Michael Omi and Howard Winant have called a “great [moment] of . . . mainstream political upsurge.” Backlash followed both periods.<sup>5</sup>

We are witnessing a similar backlash today: an energized racism overlapping with and subsequent to the administration of the first black president and the renewal of emancipatory movements for justice. The emergence of white supremacist militias in city centers has forced all but the most craven to acknowledge that racism is resurgent in US political life. To push Friedman's metaphor just a bit further: If Obama's election ushered in a “reconstruction,” then we in the aftermath of the Obama administration should be extraordinarily cautious about what came after the first Reconstruction: *Plessy v. Ferguson*, the Wilmington political coup, and Jim Crow.

I raise the specter of Reconstruction's long aftermath not to conflate its historical particularity with that of the present but rather to suggest that historical parallels might enable us to think about the structural operations of racism. We need to understand, I think, not simply how US society enables racial despotism but how the experience of that despotism by its ostensible beneficiaries enables its reinvention. We need a scholarship not simply of race but of *racism*. Such a scholarship might begin, I think, by reading newly resurgent racisms as structures of feeling. As formulated by Raymond Williams half a century ago, structures of feeling offer an analytic for explaining messy, even incoherent, systems of belief. As lived and expressed, such structures appear more often as “a latency” across and between formal ideologies.<sup>6</sup> Williams explains: “The new generation responds in its own ways to the unique world it is inheriting, taking up many continuities, that can be traced, . . . yet feeling its whole life in certain ways differently, and shaping its

creative response into a new structure of feeling.”<sup>7</sup> While social, legal, and political structures might pass from generation to generation relatively intact, structures of feeling, partly articulated and even internally contradictory, are invented anew. I suggest that understanding racism as such a structure would enable us to confront its four primary vectors—racial terrorism, state violence, reactionary politics, and exclusionary laws—not as a coherent project to be contested ideologically but a cluster of latent, even contradictory, potentials.

We might begin exploring such structures of racist feeling in Shelby, North Carolina. Dylann Roof, who would be convicted of murdering nine people in the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, was arrested in Shelby. When Roof was captured in June 2015, a news report described his appearance in the small community as “unlikely.”<sup>8</sup> Perhaps it was. But the town, like the AME Church of Charleston itself, offers kinetic depth to an observer with a sense of history. Shelby was also the childhood home of the white supremacist author Thomas Dixon Jr. The confluences between past and present offer an opportunity to see the functioning of racism as something other than a set of “fixed forms,” or a formal ideology. Dixon and Roof are in some ways coincident with one another, a fact emblemized by their transhistorical, geographic proximity. Both men, however, expressed their racism through a set of mixed-up (what Williams might call “pre-emergent”) logics—beliefs that verged on incoherence even as they tended toward a renewal of despotism.<sup>9</sup> Roof and Dixon, separated by a century but united by geography, reach similar conclusions via convoluted, inarticulate routes.

### **Dixon and Roof in the City of Pleasant Living**

Following Roof’s arrest in Shelby, known as the “City of Pleasant Living,” writers attempted to make sense of his act of mass murder. Perhaps understandably, many stressed his distance from the so-called mainstream of American life. The *Washington Post*’s Stephanie McCrummen, for instance, lingered on the trailer park where Roof spent several weeks prior to the shooting, describing the space as an “American Void.”<sup>10</sup> The Reconstruction historians Eric Foner and Douglas Egerton were two of the few writers to clearly and forthrightly link Roof’s attack to the madness of a racist culture without pouring out bromides about individual pathology. Foner wrote that “Roof has a sense of history, warped though it may be.”<sup>11</sup> Foner does not explore precisely how Roof’s “sense of history” became “warped,” and yet I would suggest that

the white supremacist shooter's inarticulate, pre-emergent racist logic—his “warped” sense of the past—demands attention. Consider, for instance, his anti-Semitism. In his manifesto, the “jews” initially “are White.” Then, they are part of an organized effort to undermine white power. Finally, they are an “enigma.” Roof believes he will bring about a new birth of apartheid in the United States, but he offers contradictory descriptions of his hoped-for racial order.<sup>12</sup> Roof arrives at conclusions similar to those of his racist predecessors not through doctrinaire white supremacy but through a welter of confused cultural logics.

Roof describes in his manifesto the process of coming to racist consciousness—he calls it “racial awareness”—through a mixture of online radicalization and an intuitive belief in white vulnerability. He writes:

The event that truly awakened me was the Trayvon Martin case. I kept hearing and seeing his name, and eventually I decided to look him up. I read the Wikipedia article and right away I was unable to understand what the big deal was. It was obvious that Zimmerman was in the right. But more importantly this prompted me to type in the words “black on White crime” into Google, and I have never been the same since that day. The first website I came to was the Council of Conservative Citizens. There were pages upon pages of these brutal black on White murders. I was in disbelief . . . How could the news be blowing up the Trayvon Martin case while hundreds of these black on White murders got ignored?

Many readers met Roof's manifesto with incredulity, concluding that it was all nihilism and illogic. The murder of an unarmed black teenager prompts him to conclude that African American people represent a significant threat to white people. It causes him, in short, to argue that the death of one black person necessitates the deaths of more black people. Earlier in his manifesto, he suggests that whites tend not to think about race in their daily lives, asserting that “we need to and have to.”<sup>13</sup> White racial consciousness is necessary, he explains, if whites are to bring about the forcible return of apartheid.

But while Roof does not suggest a mechanism by which we might move from individual acts of terror to social transformation, he reveals the process by which a welter of experiences and representational modes moved him toward a recognizable form of white supremacy. Williams writes that “the living will not be reduced” to fixed worldviews or

ideologies. Rather, they experience “tensions, shifts, and uncertainties” as structures of feeling and belief take shape through lived experience.<sup>14</sup> Roof’s writing reflects precisely this lived and living confusion. Roof charts his own escalating rage at the false promise of whiteness, the promise that whiteness might protect a person from feelings of vulnerability. Segregation, Roof explains, was meant to “protect us from having to interact with them, and from being physically harmed by them.” On the subject of white flight, he writes: “Who is fighting for these White people forced by economic circumstances to live among negroes?”<sup>15</sup> Roof feels his way toward grievance and then casts about for ideologies to explain it. He settles on a confused mixture of art, history, and politics. He quotes from *Himizu* (2011), a brutally violent Japanese arthouse film examining teenage alienation. He photographed the number “1488,” a neo-Nazi slogan, written in sand on Sullivan’s Island, the site where enslaved Africans were quarantined before being sold in in Charleston. And he uses the space of his manifesto to approvingly cite the Council of Conservative Citizens, a successor organization to the White Citizens’ Councils of the civil rights era. Roof, in short, embraces a mixed-up, even contradictory, set of political and artistic projects: Lost Cause nationalism, Neo-Nazism, and even Japanese gonzo filmmaking.

While Roof’s racism may strike the observer as both profoundly recognizable and strangely new, the white supremacist projects of the post-Reconstruction period were likewise acts of reinvention and mixture. Late nineteenth-century white supremacist structures of feeling, like their twenty-first century corollaries, were not fixed and articulate (as they often appear in simplified stories about the US past) but confused and self-contradictory.

Consider the experience more than a century earlier of Thomas Dixon Jr. For Dixon, also, racist consciousness emerged in the context of the murder of a black man. Dixon claims that, as a child, he watched his father, uncle, and 1,500 Klansmen lynch an accused rapist—who had been pardoned by the state’s Republican governor—in the Shelby town square in the summer of 1870. A short time later, during the postbellum struggle between Confederate nationalists and the Reconstruction government of North Carolina, Dixon was asked by members of his family what he wanted to be when he grew up. As he later wrote:

I promptly replied in deep serious tones: “I’m going to be a Gawddam Pussecuter!” Meaning the prosecuting District Attorney. And when the crowd roared [my brother] asked his next question: “And then

what will you do?" I . . . snappily replied: "I'll send every damned Radical to the penitentiary for life!" An explosion that was greeted by cheers.<sup>16</sup>

Dixon did indeed become a prosecuting attorney prior to his success as a New York minister and Hollywood novelist. Yet the relation between lynching and the seizure of legal structures appears at first to defy logical sense. If Dixon's family controlled a private army—the Klan—able to enforce racial despotism, why did they need to seize the legal structures of a supposedly ineffectual state? And if their goal was the seizure of state power, why attempt to enforce the will of Southern white supremacists extralegally? The answer, I suggest, is that race hatred provides an organizing principle but not a coherent ideology. As a structure of feeling, it does not have to "await . . . rationalization before" it can "exert palpable pressures."<sup>17</sup> For those explaining the world to themselves through a welter of half-understood race science, Christian theology, and economic theory, the legal and the extralegal alike serve as means of realizing their inarticulate longing for renewed despotism.

Dixon's art and politics, in short, were as confused as Roof's. A fundamentalist Christian who believed in evolution, Dixon saw no conflict between capitalism and Christianity. (He once secured a promise of \$500,000 from John D. Rockefeller to create a 2,000-seat nondenominational auditorium and high-rise office in Manhattan from which to preach his unique blend of imperialism, white supremacy, and salvation.<sup>18</sup>) Moreover, his influences were surprisingly broad. An inveterate plagiarizer, Dixon left a record of his own reading through his acts of intellectual theft—reading that included Walt Whitman, Leopold Lewis, Sir Walter Scott, and even Harriet Beecher Stowe.<sup>19</sup> Dixon sutured his white supremacy together from a welter of ideological, cultural, and artistic productions.

Behind white supremacy lay a practical concern: how might political actors, as Nikhil Pal Singh puts it, "both defend and legitimate a social order built on ongoing murder and dispossession."<sup>20</sup> Only a structure of feeling can solve this problem. Roof reads about the murder of Trayvon Martin and concludes that more black people should be murdered. This is, of course, not a rational legitimation of power, but neither is it a rational description of how illegitimate power might be realized. It is a feeling, justified by a pre-emergent ideology cobbled from the detritus of culture. A scholarly focus on racism will attune us to the inarticulate operations of racist feeling as an organizing principle for

the continuation, legitimation, and even transformation of racial despotism. In a time when we are witnessing racial violence along the same vectors that can be observed in the post-Reconstruction period (vigilante violence, police violence, racist political speech, and discriminatory law), we should be attuned to the inarticulate operations of racism. The question, then, is this: How might we move toward an anti-racist scholarship that places the pre-emergent structure of racism at the center of public discourse?

### **From Race to Racism in the Age of Deconstruction**

In *The Charleston Syllabus* (2016) the scholars Chad Williams, Kidada Williams, and Keisha Blain explicitly reject the popular narrative of Roof's marginality. In their introduction, they write: "Dylann Roof was not an anomaly but, in fact, a product of American history."<sup>21</sup> They contend that a renewed scholarly focus on the history of slavery, race, and apartheid in the United States will attune us to the continuities between Roof's dream of racial domination and the history of that domination. I would add that a scholarship not merely of race but of *racism* might attune us both to historical continuities *and* to the new structures of feeling that bring the violence of the past roaring into the present.

If racism functions as such a structure—if it enables racial despotism without precisely articulating a justification for that despotism—then a scholarly attention to racism's structural dimensions will reveal the organizing illogic of vigilante violence, state violence, and racist politics. Racism often strikes observers as profoundly unreasoning. Dixon baffled those who sought ideological consistency in his writing because the organizing principle of his work was a longing for domination. Racism was the point. Roof, likewise, presents us with a baffling hodgepodge of unreason. Indeed, Roof ends his manifesto by asking for his reader's indulgence. "Please forgive any typos," he concludes, as if grammatical mistakes were the crime for which he would require forgiveness. Roof, like Dixon, operates according to an experiential set of racial illogics. A scholarship of racism—of what W. E. B. Du Bois described as "deep and passionate hatred, vast by the very vagueness of its expressions"—is urgently needed.<sup>22</sup> And attention to the nineteenth-century manifestations of this structure of feeling, I suggest, might illuminate not merely the organization of racial despotism in the United States but the baffling acts of cultural mixture and borrowing that racist political actors use to justify their inarticulate longing for that despotism. Such an inquiry enables us to understand that this illogic—this

pre-emergent welter of half-expressed ideologies—will continually reinvent itself. And yet inquiring into racism's mutability will also allow scholars to confront racism in all of its guises. This, I would suggest, is our task. Reconstruction is over. Let Reconstruction begin.

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