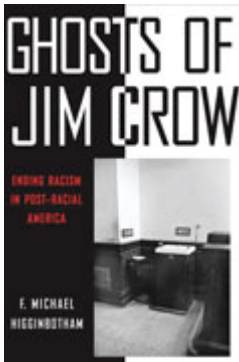


Exorcizing our racial ghosts

Alex Mikulich | Oct. 30, 2013



GHOSTS OF JIM CROW: ENDING RACISM IN POST-RACIAL AMERICA

By F. Michael Higginbotham

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Racism is a wound that afflicts all Americans. No one escapes it. Yet listening to recent media commentary, such as the Trayvon Martin case, few if any public conversations acknowledge how all Americans are complicit in the racial status quo and how all of us suffer from this wound.

In this context, where too many commentators claim both racial expertise and innocence, yet demonstrate neither, it is refreshing to read F. Michael Higginbotham's *Ghosts of Jim Crow: Ending Racism in Post-Racial America*.

Forthright about his own class privilege, Higginbotham, like W.E.B. Du Bois before him, is clear that everyone is implicated. No one is racially innocent.

Acknowledging our own complicity in American racism is a crucial first step in turning our attention to how we must share responsibility for building the positive peace of racial justice in a multiracial America.

The issue then must turn to applying a common analysis and developing an understanding individually, institutionally and collectively of how whites and people of color take up various roles of oppressor, victim and bystander in the drama.

Higginbotham celebrates our significant American achievements in race relations as he invites readers to notice the myriad ways the "ghosts" of slavery and Jim Crow continue to haunt every facet of life.

Ghosts of Jim Crow insightfully draws the broad plot lines of the American racial paradigm:

- False notions of white superiority in relationship to black inferiority;
- Black separation and white isolation;
- Black victimization through "the process of racialization, discrimination, and disproportionate impact"

that continues "preventing entry into a truly post-racial period."

Part 1 invites the reader to remember slavery and Jim Crow in U.S. history and how ideas of white superiority and black inferiority were applied to enforce slavery and its economic dominance. We must grapple with this history together.

The original U.S. Constitution was "an exercise in nondisclosure" that sanctioned black slavery "while studiously excluding the word 'slavery' from the document." The founders knew, of course, that any criticism of British slavery in the Declaration of Independence was hypocritical. As Higginbotham observes, the "framers sought the most artful method to quietly maintain black oppression" in the Constitution. The founding fathers demonstrated great courage in opposing British colonialism yet cowardice in "signing a document that ? laid the foundation for centuries of racial inequality."

Re-examining the Civil War period, we ought not be surprised that on July 13, 1863, nearly seven months after Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, "white rioters in New York City targeted blacks as the cause of their economic and social problems." Although many white commentators predicted black violence and rioting in the wake of the Trayvon Martin decision (and were wrong), the dominant pattern of U.S. history is one of white violence against blacks.

Part 2 details the many ways social and public policy advanced, rather than deterred, racial segregation in schools and neighborhoods in the late 20th century. Too often we hear white Americans ask: What more than Jim Crow kept blacks down? The question itself betrays ignorance about how devastating Jim Crow was for African-Americans. It pours salt in the wound of racism. It forgets the devastating impact of lynching on entire communities.

Yet the question also betrays ignorance of the multiple ways that whites benefited from the New Deal and subsequent welfare policy while it effectively excluded African-American workers. While whites benefited from the GI bill post-World War II, more than 437,000 African-Americans who served valiantly were not supplied with any such economic opportunity to increase their education or start a new business, much less thanked for their sacrifice.

Federal housing policy, in cooperation with banking and insurance companies, redlined African-American neighborhoods, effectively preventing home and small business loans from boosting the development of black communities in the mid-20th century.

Simultaneously, the most beneficial housing and business loan terms stimulated white flight and suburbanization. Add the removal of a substantial urban tax base through white flight, de-industrialization, and federal and state defunding of cities, and urban decay should not surprise us. Yet white Americans conveniently forget how we capitalized on economic affirmative action as we blame African-Americans for the deadly consequences of the urban downturn.

Higginbotham highlights the strong arguments of Shelby Steele and John McWhorter who argue that blacks have fallen into dependency and "victimology." He stresses the need for blacks to limit appeals to racism "as an excuse for not trying or for misdirected efforts."

Nevertheless, Higginbotham stresses that the overwhelming majority of African-Americans are responsible and hard-working. This fact has been underscored repeatedly throughout history in the ways African-Americans constantly overcome barriers, "making individual sacrifices, and exhibiting undeniable patriotism and incredible resiliency. It is a story of which all Americans can be proud."

Part 3 details what must be done to secure a future free of racism. Real change will require significant work by whites and all people of color to address the destructive roles each respectively appropriate.

Not unlike Charles Dickens' famous admonition in *A Christmas Carol* that the creation of justice demands ongoing and simultaneous recognition of past, present and future "ghosts" of truth, so Higginbotham invites enactment of a Racial Equality Act that would include a "test that is based upon our racial history and the laws that continue to support disparate impact. Any neutral practice by the government causing a significant disparity in an important activity that reinforces or is related to racial hierarchy, results in black separation, or directly causes black victimization would be prohibited unless proof of a nonracial reason was established."

Such a Racial Equality Act would contend with the fact that racial history is present in everything we do.

The counter-memory, or what theologians term the dangerous memory, of the Middle Passage and slavery still cries out to the living for response; it is not enough to say that the slaves are free, nor can the marks of slavery be erased by the passage of time, ignorance, avoidance or protests against remembering those troubled waters.

While Higginbotham delivers incisive historical analysis of the legal judgments that created social norms of white innocence and black criminality to enforce slavery, its dangerous memory casts its shadow against white Christianity, so deeply implicated in the practice and endurance of slavery and its ghosts. If Higginbotham had at least cited the classic African-American, Latin American and Native American critiques of white Christianity, it would have bolstered his moral argument for apology and reparation.

White Christian traditions resist the dangerous memory of slavery because it threatens to disrupt a way of life that depends upon yawning inequalities in criminal justice, incarceration, education, health care, housing, access to credit, and employment.

Ghosts of Jim Crow clearly understands that the most effective approach will dismantle both the cultural underpinnings of white superiority and black inferiority as well as the legal and structural cornerstones of racial inequality. If we are going to become "one nation, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all," and free ourselves of the ghosts of Jim Crow, we will need our common paths illumined by Higginbotham's capacious wisdom and compassion.

[Alex Mikulich is co-author of *The Scandal of White Complicity in US Hyper-Incarceration: A Nonviolent Spirituality of White Resistance* (Palgrave MacMillan).]

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