THE SALVADORAN WILLIE HORTON
MS-13, ELECTORAL POLITICS, AND RACIALIZED FEAR MONGERING

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Willie Horton – A Reintroduction
As criminologists, we study the relationships (both real and perceived) between race, class, gender, and crime. Perceptions of crime do not always accurately reflect one’s risk for victimization, and there is a sordid history of using high-profile crime events to weaponize xenophobia and racism for political gain. One example from the late 20th century is the notorious 1988 Willie Horton “attack ad” used by Republican Vice President George H.W. Bush against his Democratic presidential challenger Michael Dukakis. Willie Horton, serving a life sentence for murder, committed a violent crime while participating in a weekend-long community reentry program in Massachusetts (Dukakis’ home state). However, the racist subtext of the ad was that Willie Horton’s case was a) unrepresentative of broader victimization trends and b) effectively used as a justification for mobilizing racist beliefs of black men generally.

This same tactic of cultivating white fear by demonizing “othered” groups of people is being repeated by the Trump Administration, and with the same overall goal: mobilizing institutions of formal social control against a less powerful and historically subjugated population. In today’s migration discourse, a parallel process is underway. Unrepresentative and statistically rare cases involving MS-13 are being used to associate criminality with Latino migrants.

These discourses are effective because voters and publics at large are seldom persuaded by scholarly articles or evidence-based arguments alone. As communication scholar Walter Fisher argued in 1984, people sometimes respond better to narratives, or stories with readily understandable themes: heroes and villains, good guys and bad guys, plot twists and motives, threats and responses. Whether it’s a Disney movie synopsis or the Old Testament, all stories reflect embedded belief systems and power distributions—often conceptualized in terms of race, class, and gender. Through this orientation, it would be understandable if racially and ethnically homogenous audiences—particularly those who have little connections to border communities or Latinx populations—develop fear of migrants, given the robustly funded and carefully curated alarmist narratives that are perpetuated on the national media conglomerate of Fox News.

In this essay, we discuss how one political ad helps perpetuate these racist and xenophobic narratives so that some viewers might eventually believe them. We also offer a way for academics

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to intervene. We discuss the ways academics can use more democratic outlets—such as Citizen Critics—to provide counter-narratives based in evidence.

**MS-13 as a Racialized Electoral Strategy**

In the 2017 Virginia gubernatorial election, former Republican candidate Ed Gillespie employed a “Salvadoran Willie Horton” ad of his own. There are two versions of the ad, both of which attempt to link Democratic candidate Ralph Northam’s perceived support for “sanctuary cities” with the threat of MS-13. Ads like these might confuse viewers about the immigrant-crime relationship. Similar to George H.W. Bush’s Willie Horton ad, the point is not to make an empirical case for why you should be concerned about crime, safety, and justice policies, but to further stoke anti-migrant sentiment and convert white fear into voter turnout.

Both through imagery and explicit narration, the advertisement shows the words “KILL, RAPE, CONTROL” followed by stock photos of MS-13 gang members in El Salvador. Ed Gillespie appears alongside law enforcement officers. This draws a clear distinction between the purported chaos, disorder, and violence that Ralph Northam’s gubernatorial policies might bring, and the safety, security, and “law and order” presence that Ed Gillespie ostensibly represents. The embedded racial dog whistle connecting Willie Horton to MS-13 is that the viewer should more than simply fear William Horton himself, and actual MS-13 members, but should also fear all individuals who look like them (i.e., non-white men).

Of course, there are limitations to the analogies between William Horton – a black man – and underspecified members of Mara Salvatrucha. While “black & brown” are often problematically lumped together like academic and social justice “peanut butter & jelly” rhetorical sandwiches, blackness and brownness are as similar as they are different. In this case, the analogy illustrates how racial-ethnic animus is constructed and communicated for electoral gain.

Additional differences between the Horton ad and our current focus is that the former had zero association with anti-immigration policies or the discourse concerning ‘sanctuary cities.’ To be clear, there is no evidence that a) sanctuary city policies and b) increased immigration are generators of crime in the United States. No matter how you slice the numbers, the evidence simply does not support claims made by the Trump Administration and Fox News. In fact, immigrants in the U.S. actually exhibit lower crime rates than what the Trump Administration suggests. In some contexts, studies have shown that migrants have a protective influence on community crime rates and thus may actually help reduce crime.

**MS-13 Takeaways**

Undocumented migrants are not a public safety threat. While MS-13 is a known gang that has been responsible for high-profile and serious forms of harm and victimization, such cases are disproportionately sensationalized. Serious attacks are infrequent, and tend to be directed either at the gang’s rivals or own members. In other words, you are safe and secure from MS-13 in the same way that you were safe and secure from Willie Horton himself had you been around in 1988. We feel comfortable saying this, because we’re part of the team that spent the last six years on the largest federal research grant that studies MS-13’s transnational capacity across the U.S. and El Salvador.
To be sure, there are valid reasons to be concerned about MS-13’s existence, as they are responsible for **gruesome** and **exceptionally violent** homicides. But, the MS-13 threat is mostly one that affects Central American communities in the United States. Restrictive immigration policies like deportations—as opposed to harm-reductionist or public health policies—may **actually facilitate** MS-13’s organizational franchise. Such policies can push immigrant communities further into the shadows and create vulnerable pools of potential gang victims and adolescent recruits. Family members, even those with legal status, can be **less likely** to **report victimization** to the police **out of fear** of possible immigration enforcement actions for themselves or their loved ones. In short, current policies can be criminogenic in that they legally incentivize victimization: who is a better crime target than someone who won’t dial 911 for fear of deportation?

**Reframing the Problem: From Scapegoats and Crimmigration to State Crime**

*Crimmigration*—or the criminalization of migrants and migration—is **incompatible with core principles** of community policing and procedural justice. This strongly suggests that now is the time to positively engage with migrant communities, as opposed to referring to humans as *criminal aliens* in need of stringent controls. This “tough on crime” and “rules are rules” discourse should be tempered with the recognition that **legality and morality** have **no necessary connection**, and that illegal border crossings are most analogous to status offenses like underage drinking or anti-vagrancy statutes. We should disentangle illegal *acts* with illegal *personhood*, especially when the migration laws in question have **no inherent** moral content and when the *reasons* for mass migratory flows from Central America are beyond the scope of what Anderson Cooper or Chris Cuomo can say on television.

Fear and hatred of foreigners and racialized groups, along with unbridled nationalism, have **historically coincided** with periods of marked *social* or *economic change*. Racialized governance has **always been embedded** in U.S. *institutions* and *public ideologies*. We are far from the first to claim that power-wielding groups and institutions can blame “foreign” entities and agents for structural dilemmas and contradictions that stem from *white supremacy* and *racial capitalism*.

For instance, as a separate case study in externalizing or scapegoating the symptoms of internal contradictions, consider how “Russian meddling” has consumed “threats to democracy” discourse, which can only make sense if “democracy” is synonymous with “**global economic dominance**”. Threats from an external entity take attention away from domestic threats to democratic rule, and the internal threats are serious. Systematically racist and classist practices of *felon disenfranchisement*, *gerrymandering*, the *electoral college*, and campaign finance reflect a racial-capitalist configuration of power that has been central to electoral outcomes since this country’s inception.

With this broader context in mind, the ‘Salvadoran Willie Horton’ political advertisements reflect how electoral politics contributes to broader racialization projects. Converting Eurocentric racism (e.g., white supremacy, U.S. American exceptionalism) into practices and policies that generate racialized inequalities (e.g., mass incarceration, migration controls) is as American as apple pie. The nexus between deportability and *criminalization*—or the processes by which acts become defined as crimes worthy of state intervention—similarly reflects *political economies of race and law*.
These broader reflections are generally beyond the scope of academic discourse, considering how academe neither encourages nor rewards legitimately radical theory. In spite of these structural limitations, as citizen critics we have one concluding message that centers both past and present forms of racialized social control. Some readers might be able to do this better than others, but imagine what it might feel like to be associated with criminality while being systematically victimized by the state. Just as mass incarceration can be more effectively understood as racialized state crime, so too can the current manufactured “border crisis” and the ongoing process of criminalizing both the act migration and the subjectivity of being a migrant.

Understanding deportations and other carceral controls as state crime is the crime-and-justice narrative that we, like so many other critical criminologists and academics of various disciplines, are actively unpacking in empirical and conceptual terms so that we might advance more emancipatory forms of justice, safety, and community prosperity. In coming around full circle, statistically, it is unlikely that Salvadoran gang members, William Horton, or individuals who look like them will victimize you, but carceral technologies and modes of control, one day, just might.

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