



The Law Is a White Dog: How Legal Rituals Make and Unmake Persons

Colin Dayan

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Abused dogs, prisoners tortured in Guantánamo and supermax facilities, or slaves killed by the state—all are deprived of personhood through legal acts. Such deprivations have recurred throughout history, and the law sustains these terrors and banishments even as it upholds the civil order. Examining such troubling cases, *The Law Is a White Dog* tackles key societal questions: How does the law construct our identities? How do its rules and sanctions make or unmake persons? And how do the supposedly rational claims of the law define marginal entities, both natural and supernatural, including ghosts, dogs, slaves, terrorist suspects, and felons? Reading the language, allusions, and symbols of legal discourse, and bridging distinctions between the human and nonhuman, Colin Dayan looks at how the law disfigures individuals and animals, and how slavery, punishment, and torture create unforeseen effects in our daily lives.

Moving seamlessly across genres and disciplines, Dayan considers legal practices and spiritual beliefs from medieval England, the North American colonies, and the Caribbean that have survived in our legal discourse, and she explores the civil deaths of felons and slaves through lawful repression. Tracing the legacy of slavery in the United States in the structures of the contemporary American prison system and in the administrative detention of ghostly supermax facilities, she also demonstrates how contemporary jurisprudence regarding cruel and unusual punishment prepared the way for abuses in Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo.

Using conventional historical and legal sources to answer unconventional questions, *The Law Is a White Dog* illuminates stark truths about civil society's ability to marginalize, exclude, and dehumanize.



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