Meet our new faculty: Yvette Butler

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by joboyd

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Associate Professor **Yvette T. Butler** joined the Indiana Law faculty this summer. She earned an undergraduate degree from the University of Minnesota, Morris, and her law degree from The George Washington University Law School.

**The most obvious one (to me, anyway!): What was the draw for you in terms of leaving Mississippi for Indiana?**

IU is such an exciting opportunity. The faculty is so welcoming and are rockstars in their subject areas; the students are bright, friendly, and motivated (I’ve never had students attend my job talk before! And they asked wonderful questions); and Indiana, as a state, provides ample challenges and opportunities. I love that the Law School is pulling together (as I’ve been calling it) a Justice League, with this new cohort of professors that all bring unique perspectives to the criminal system.

**Your expertise encompasses a number of interesting issues—from the marginalization of sex workers to police misconduct to advocating on behalf of human trafficking survivors. What pulled you in that direction, as opposed to say, civil procedure or tax law?**

For what it’s worth, I’m a big believer in the idea that there’s another universe with another me that is focused on Tax Law (or an infinite number of other subjects, really). The law as a whole is fascinating and (even though I took Federal Income Tax in law school) I didn’t have the kind of exposure to it that would have prompted me to dedicate my life to it (there’s a
need for tax law expertise to support human trafficking survivors, for example!) But one thing that does hold true across space, time, and dimensions is my drive to address marginalization. It's hard to say exactly what pulled me in that direction – whether it is my own identity as a black woman, my maternal grandfather’s history as a labor activist turned diplomat, or the fact that my paternal grandfather was a Tuskegee Airman, or the bogus legal trouble my brother found himself in while in high school (which was addressed in his favor, thank goodness). But in this universe, in this timeline, I feel like I was pulled exactly where I needed to be: marginalization, power, and the pursuit of Collective Liberation!

You were an award-winning teacher at the University of Mississippi, having won the Ben Hardy Faculty Excellence Award just last year. What do you enjoy about being in the classroom? How do you connect with students?

I get a renewed energy every semester. There’s nothing like a fresh crop of law students filled with hopes, dreams, anxieties, and passion for their future career. I love engaging with students in ways that makes the material come alive. I remember being in law school and feeling confused and disconnected from the material. I remember wishing I had more context for what I was learning. To that end, I love using music, art, poetry, contextualized history, and current events to relate back to the material. I’ve had many students tell me that helps them understand what our cases are about (especially for a class like Constitutional Law) and also helps them see themselves and the issues they care about in the law.

Could you talk about any current or upcoming research projects you’re excited about?

My research generally focuses on why and how survival activities are criminalized and if and how they can be protected by the Constitution, or otherwise. I have two threads of current research projects (with about three planned articles for each) that I think are pretty exciting. The one I’ll focus on here is about our understanding of survival, criminalized survival, and the connection to labor. There is a lot of interesting stuff out there on a possible “right to earn a living” in the Constitution. I’m fascinated by how the Constitution can protect some kinds of labor, while leaving other kinds of labor open to criminalization. Ultimately, this means that various marginalized people are open to criminalization, instead of protection. Why is that? How is that? What should we do instead?

Your interests seem to overlap in some ways with the work of Prof. India Thusi. Have you two had a chance to connect?

We have! We’ve known each other for 3-4 years now. Our work really feeds off of each other, I think. We’re both critical theorists who ask a lot of questions about sex, crime, and policing. But we also have very divergent interests. Prof. Thusi is great and I’m looking forward to being just a few office doors away!

Finally, how do you enjoy spending time away from academia?
Three words: trashy, reality, television.