

# ‘People are Trapped in History and History is Trapped Inside Them’<sup>1</sup>: Exploring Britain’s Racialized Colonial Legacies in Criminological Research

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In this paper, we advocate identifying the colonizing logics of race in criminological analysis, in recognition of their enduring postcolonial presence in societies like the United Kingdom. Our argument unfolds through the life stories narrated by three men entangled by colonial remnants of power(lessness), subservience, and criminalization. For Cairo (black) and Rafan (Asian), their subalternity is exposed through their vulnerability to racialized stereotypes which have a foundation in colonial histories. Both young minority ethnic men are also situated in a transnational, glocalised frame in which their racialized and gendered identities prescribed the nature of their belonging to a British nation-state irrevocably connected to the Empire. Our reflections on a third narrative interview of Barry reveal the dividends of whiteness, simultaneously occluded, disavowed, and yet willfully upheld, but in a competitive and exclusive form of belonging. In the articulation and analysis of these stories of crime and order, we mine styles of reasoning from postcolonial theory, sociology, history, and philosophy to embolden a postcolonial criminology.

**KEY WORDS:** colonialism, postcolonial, race, hierarchy, stereotypes, whiteness

## INTRODUCTION

The African American public intellectual, James Baldwin (1958/1998)—on reflecting on being the only black man in a remote Swiss mountain village where the whiteness of the landscape seemed to represent the racial naivety of its inhabitants—was prompted to observe that ‘people are trapped in history and history is trapped inside them’ (1958/1998: 119). The Swiss villagers

1 Baldwin (1958/1998: 119).

touching his strange hair and skin was predicated on European innocence of the profound racist violence which always accompanied black presence in the United States. Contrasting the United States with Europe, Baldwin observed that slavery irreversibly inserted the black man into the social fabric of US society, while 'Europe's black possessions remained, and do remain, in Europe's colonies, at which remove they represent[ed] no threat whatever to European identity'. This was an inaccuracy even then, but one which has tended to regularly re-emerge as the United States is defined as the exemplar of racial dystopia, distracting attention from examining, for example, British legacies of colonialism and imperialism (Phillips *et al.* 2020).

In this article, we locate and unpack the interconnectedness of history and biography as Baldwin has done, but with attention focused on Europe's 'black and brown colonial possessions'. To sharpen and deepen criminological analysis, we specifically seek to expose the relevance of the collective violence of colonialism for contemporary experiences of crime, social order, and justice. We take as given Mbembe's (2017: 177) admonition that 'we cannot act as if slavery and colonisation never took place or as if we are completely rid of the legacies of such an unhappy period'. In so doing we also take heed of Sayer's (2000: 16) account of realism in social science, that 'the past and other places (now absent) are present in the here and now', but may be never fully discernible. The sediments of the past inform actor's dispositions and interactions in the present, according to Sayer, such that there must be a two-way 'fusing of horizons' of the listener-researcher and the speaker-research participant, as the former conjures into scholarly meaning the actions and words of the latter.

Engaging with the alchemies of race, colonialism, and biography, our 'fusing' and 'conjuring' uses narrative case studies drawn from our research collaborations. Our contribution is to use *empirical data* to surface the specificities of coloniality from the tangled life stories of three individuals whose positions in British society are differentially conditioned by history. We underscore the ontological vitality of differential racialization in *lived experience* in ways not always fully foregrounded in criminological discourse, even in that emanating from decolonizing efforts (Phillips *et al.* 2020). The next section highlights key insights from the extant literature before we set out our methodological approach. We then turn to our empirical data and its analysis.

## THE VIOLENCE OF THE PAST, AMBIVALENCE OF THE PRESENT, AND THE DISTANCE TO THE FUTURE: 'I AM THE SUGAR AT THE BOTTOM OF THE ENGLISH CUP OF TEA'<sup>2</sup>

For postcolonial scholars, such as Mbembe (2017: 37), the project of modernity was marked fundamentally by European imperialism, with transatlantic slavery prefacing capitalist domination, such that slaves can be characterized as the 'first coal shovelers of our modernity', positioned then (and now) by inferior race and class membership. Mbembe argues that we must look to capitalism to locate the cultural compulsion for classification and measurement that order racial hierarchies materially, symbolically, and psychically. The objectification, commodification and extraction of labour imposed a value system through slavery, indentured labour and in subsequent proletarian labour relations, leaving a detritus, which has historically, albeit not entirely, been composed of blackness and brownness.

Producing and disseminating knowledge about dysfunctional Others who might be obstructive to the colonizer and the desired colonial order was a fundamental aspect of imperial regimes (Mukherjee 2003). The white gaze produced the object and objective of race to dehumanize and to cast the black man as tangential to humanity, disfigured by a base violence, lasciviousness,

2 Stuart Hall (1991/1997: 48).

and a primitive depravity (Mbembe 2017). For Hume and other Enlightenment intellectuals, the inferiority of Negro intellect, cognition, and morality, and what Kant called the ‘meager talent’ of yellow Indians, their indecision, superstition, and weakness, were immutable traits, relationally set within a racial hierarchy in which white supremacy sat at the pinnacle (Eze 2002). Indian men were caste as effeminate, subservient, and obsequious (Sinha 1995; Chopra *et al.* 2004). These may have built upon pre-existing stereotypes of Indian tribal banditry (Pillavsky 2015), but it is clear that colonial rule advanced these stereotypes of congenital criminality to cement vertical power relations.

And as Stuart Hall (1991/1997) so poignantly put it, symbolically the Empire has constituted white English identity for centuries, intricately woven into the idea of the nation and who can belong. Hall interrogates the powerful motif of the ‘English’ cup of sugared tea, entirely produced in the colonies as the ‘outside history that is inside the history of the English’ (Hall 1991/1997: 48). Even a contrived ignorance of whiteness (Wekker 2015) cannot fully dodge the implications and identifications revealed in historical analyses (see *inter alia* Hall 2002). Notwithstanding, Garner’s (2006) notion of ‘contingent hierarchies’ reminds us that while the dividends of whiteness are always present, there may be multiple trajectories, through stratification by class, religion and nation.

Negative characterizations of the black and brown colonized were readily conveyed through politics, education, literature, and entertainment to signify inferiority and primitiveness and superiority and civilization. As critical criminologists (Cunneen 1999; Agozino 2003) and Southern criminologists (Carrington *et al.* 2019b; cf. Moosavi 2018 on ‘Australian criminology’) have readily pointed out, colonial power was embedded in and constitutive of penal institutions, ideologies, and practices, operating at the economic, political, and sociocultural levels. Legal codes and treaties might have provided the official mechanism for European territorial expansion that legitimized violent dispossession, but the brutal subjugation involved was a matter of personal experience. In Kenya, for example, collective punishment ordinances enabled crackdowns against those seen to defy government authority (Whittaker 2015), and Caribbean imperial histories are revealing of the violent repression of black protest and assumptions of black criminality (Anderson and Killingray 1991; Thomas 2012; Chivallon and Howard 2017; José 2018). Likewise, Sherman’s (2009) historical analysis outlines the panoply of coercive state practices operating in everyday life in India, while Anderson’s (2018) account captures the brutality of penal labour in South Asia, where Bengali and Madras convicts had their name, crime and date of sentence tattooed on their foreheads. And even with the formal end of direct colonial rule the imprints of imperialism (but also its contestation) were not necessarily dissolved. Whittaker (2015) and Brown (2016) observed continuities in the governance of crime across pre- and post-independence Kenya and India, respectively, and Elliott-Cooper’s (2021) work highlights the traditions of anti-colonial resistance in the Caribbean informing activism against racist policing in Britain (see also Lawrence 1982; Nijjar 2015). Other historical accounts of the early postcolonial years in Britain offer a nuanced picture of how colonial logics were transplanted in the context of Commonwealth migration to Britain (Hansen 2000). As Buettner (2014), noted in her analysis of the fraught Smethwick election in 1964, for example, ‘[i]n the eyes of many critics, *all* non-white Commonwealth newcomers irrespective of their origins were associated with sexual immorality, criminal activity, poor health and hygiene’, with the culprits being both black and Indian in that locale. Similarly, as Patel’s (2021: 96) archival analysis points out, today’s hostile environment to ‘non-white’ immigration is rooted in a persistent and nostalgic imperialism, a reactionary nativism, and a series of policy decisions that can be characterized as ‘the never-ending end to the British Empire’.

Key to our thinking is the idea that colonial practices are not harmless, archaic remnants of those past times, but instead continue to take shape and matter deeply today. While the vestiges

of colonial power structures have been articulated at a macro level, in Southern and decolonizing criminology literatures, our approach here is to seek out the postcolonial reverberations in everyday life, to glimpse beyond the structure of global racial orders, to situated, *lived experience*. Our analysis explores the postcolonial contexts that Baldwin neglected, paying attention to a key site within what Currie (2018) calls the 'Global North's South'. Of course, one of the main ways in which race effects are made visible is in the differential criminalization of Black and Asian people in Britain. A second is the denial of a permanent sense of belonging to the British nation-state<sup>3</sup> through disproportionate detention and deportation as foreign Others, always underpinned by, as Trafford (2021) notes, ongoing constructions of lawlessness.

Crime, as we know, functions as an important cultural optic through which people make sense of their world. Racial stratification, media discourse, popular and political narratives combine to produce the suspicious 'criminal type' who has—and almost always has had—a black or brown face. The motifs of the male black gang member and the brown Islamist terrorist encapsulate the intense fear of the Other, building on historical representations linked to violence, cunning, impulsivity, irrationality, and moral and intellectual inferiority (Alexander 2000; Nijjar 2015; Williams 2015; Mbembe 2017). As Garland (1990) has observed, these cultural logics find their expression in how and who we deem worthy of ordering and punishment. Crime and the elusive promise of its control thus both reflect and fashion the cultural fabric of a society such that '[m]entalities, sensibilities, cultural and psychic forms have a life and a history of their own which can be traced and described from contemporary and historical sources' (Garland 1990: 198). The visceral potency of crime-as-immanent-threat conveys a predatory lawlessness haunted by the white/colonial imagination that produces a racializing index for feelings of insecurity even as they anchor them to an increasingly militarized security state (Comaroff and Comaroff 2016). Here then, we seek to demonstrate the value of capturing the recursions of colonized and colonizer dynamics through the life stories of those in postcolonial contexts. The specific contribution of this paper is to supplement broader brush approaches to decolonizing criminology (Carrington et al. 2016; 2019a; Aliverti et al. 2021) through *empirical* articulation. In so doing we seek to remedy a prior concern that colonialism, and by extension race and racism, are insufficiently part of the mainstream criminological repertoire despite their pervasive, if sometimes elusive, presence in everyday life (Phillips et al. 2020).

### LIFE HISTORIES AND BIOGRAPHICAL NARRATIVES: N = 3

To empirically tease out the connections and routes through which we can appreciate the durability of colonialism in the present is not an easy undertaking. Like Sayer (2000), Stoler (2016) too has maintained that colonial-postcolonial linkages are rarely self-evident. Life history interviews and biographical narratives offer considerable promise in this regard. They connect the listener to the personal and social history of the speaker, permitting the former to potentially access the latter's social reality and embeddedness within micro, meso and macro structures, while also exposing their existential and interior reflections (Rapport 1999; Sikes and Goodson 2017). And as Delgado and Stefancic (2012) elaborate within critical race theory (CRT), narratives can excavate ignored or alternate realities that reveal discomfiting tales and invite readers into social worlds that are not their own. Preconceptions about black criminality and Muslim terrorism, they suggest, for example, must be supplanted by 'counterstories to challenge, displace, or mock these pernicious narratives and beliefs' (Delgado and Stefancic 2012: 49). Life histories can provide a window into the intersections of the subjective, institutional,

3 Notwithstanding, using the lens of nation-states rather than imperial polities over the long durée can obscure how the violence of the imperial past relates to the postcolonial present cf. on colonial governmentality

and sociopolitical dimensions of race, both at the individual and collective level, historically and contemporarily (Knowles 1999). How postcolonial social relations are shaped in daily life can also be interpreted through the ontological proxies of race that often surface through stories about family, culture, migration, belonging, nationality and in how research participants explain what constitutes home(s) (Gunaratnam 2003; Phoenix 2017; Siouti 2017). This is as true of the variable dimensions and power structures of whiteness braided in biographical narratives as it is of minority ethnic experience (Griffin and Braidotti 2002). Moreover, as Presser and Sandberg (2019) argue, narratives can help us discover collective myths that shape subjectivities; one example being the perceived state thwarting of equal rights for white people that litter plaintive accounts of American conservatism.

This does not mean, however, that life histories and biographical narratives are not without their limitations. They can be (perhaps unfairly) categorized as subjective, open to creative construction that suits the objectives of researchers and vulnerable to abuses of authorial power. The stories told—their selective content, ordering, weighting, rhythm, omissions, repetitions, reflections, fabrications—will undoubtedly be influenced by the speaker's language facility, articulacy, and memory, the sociocultural templates available to tell and frame their story, the rapport between, and identities of, speaker and listener, the willingness or otherwise of divulging intimate experiences, and the skill levels of the listener, among other things (Plummer 2010; Sikes and Goodson 2017). Notwithstanding, as Erben (2000: 10) notes, 'the researcher is required to fix imagination in empirical sources' and cannot simply have 'free rein and take unwarranted liberties with the lives of subjects'. Explicit use of quoted text can ameliorate some of these concerns helping to move towards what Becker (1970/2008: 8) claims this approach offers—a rough approximation of the direction in which the truth lies'.

More broadly, small *n* case study designs can provide a useful corrective to criminology's quantitative reflex towards categorical causative chains in criminal justice process outcomes. There is a rich tradition of such approaches within sociology and criminology (Becker 1970/2008). Maruna and Matravers' (2007) exemplary collection, 'N = 1—Criminology and the Person', revisiting Shaw's *The Jack Roller* 100 years after the birth of its protagonist, Stanley, demonstrates how the single case can enable excursions into the 'unconscious motivations' and 'emotional conflicts' of individual lives. Bennett's (1981) related commitments to oral history and microanalytical traditions in criminology, similarly correspond with CRT's primary focus on how storytelling can powerfully illustrate the significant cumulative effect of microaggressions and the intricacies of the personal, sometimes unconscious and internalized, dynamics of race and racism (Smith and Linnemann 2015).

The three interviews discussed here have been deliberately chosen to show how we can excavate coloniality in the present. However, we are cognizant of Stoler's (2016: 169) caution against assuming we can take 'historical shortcuts to show that every contemporary injustice can be folded into an originary colonial tale'. This paper certainly does not make claims to coloniality *always* being present in *all* people's lives, but rather that careful interrogation is required to uncover its spectral essence, given the haunting presence of race as a constituent element of modern social life (Gordon 2008). Neither does the analysis presented here claim to document the *only* way in which these men's stories can be constructed and interpreted. Rather, by seeking perspectives from men whose ethnicities align with the categories of 'black', 'Asian' and 'white', we can see *how* racialized coloniality can permeate lives in the 21st century.

Turning now to our respondents.<sup>4</sup> The ethnicity of each of the three respondents and their interlocutor is loosely ethnically matched along these same axes permitting a degree of collaborative reflexive analysis in our reading of the qualitative data. Cairo of (British) Black

4 Hereafter, using their preferred pseudonyms.

Jamaican origin (interviewed by Phillips) and Rafan of (British) Bangladeshi Muslim origin (interviewed by Parmar), were drawn from a study of 20 young, minority ethnic Londoners, examining how racial orders are mobilized and resisted in everyday life. They formed a purposive sample drawn from community development and sports organizations, mosques, and other youth groups, and were interviewed on two or three occasions in 2017. Our third interviewee, Barry (interviewed by Earle), was from a study examining the construction and negotiation of ethnic and masculine prisoner identities in 2006–8, drawn from an estimated, stratified ‘random sample’ of the Local Inmate Database System (see Phillips 2012 for further methodological details).

## CAIRO

Cairo was interviewed at the age of 17 years when living with his family in South London. Asked his nationality, he was emphatic: ‘I’m Jamaican ... Yes, I’ve got British passport ... I’m Jamaican by blood’. Cairo’s proud assertion of an identity foregrounded by colonial connections is the reverse of Hall’s (1991/1997) ‘coming home’ to the mother country during mass migration in post-war Britain, and this formative essence is represented in multiple places in Cairo’s interview.

### Sexual terrorizing

Taking Stoler’s (2016) lead, we acknowledge that colonial remnants can be there and then not there, reactivated and then receding from view. More helpful, she suggests, is to think of ‘processes of partial reinscriptions, modified displacements, and amplified recuperations’ (Stoler 2016: 27). One example Cairo describes is suggestive of a recurrent colonial imaginary informing life in 21st-century London. It is important to note that Cairo is likely intent on presenting a coherent, moral self in the interview (McAdams 2001; Presser 2004; Plummer 2010), and impossible to know too is how the other actors in his story experienced the interaction, and therefore, no judgement can be made about his culpability. Cairo describes a school relationship that followed the familiar racialized contours of intimacy, readily displaying the tropes of black male hypersexuality and violent carnality. Such circuits of sexual desire historically maintained a boundary between the demonized, savage oversexualization of the colonized and the moral, virtuous chastity of the colonizers (McClintock 1995). For Fanon (1967/2008) too, the fantasy of supreme black virility underpinned colonial and postcolonial white–black interactions that characterized ‘the Negro’ as sexually omnipotent and without moral inhibitions. Cairo discusses his unfolding relationship with a new girl at his school:

I was talking to her, making sure she went into the right group of people, not the bad people. I was just taking care of her. Weeks have gone on ... she started liking me without me knowing. So, I’m just talking to her as a friend, as I talk to everybody in the school. But she started to get jealous without me knowing ... it burnt her so much that I was talking to other people, she started to get jealous, like very, very next level jealous, which I’ve never experienced in my life.

Cairo recounts how the girl reported to her father that she had been raped by Cairo. His confusion and lack of comprehension were palpable. Reporting that ‘the dad came at me, saying he’s going to kill me. He’s in front of my face and he’s going to kill me’, is reminiscent of the violent vigilantism of lynching but transposed to the contemporary streets of South London. In its ‘partial reinscription’ (Stoler 2016: 27), Cairo is subjected to a verbal assault from the girl’s

father but does not face physical retribution. The endurance of actual and anticipated colonial power, Stoler maintains, is felt by black generations as a constant, lingering threat in the present day. These colonial traces retain an essence in which belonging is never guaranteed but is always contingent, fragile, or contested.

In the retelling, Cairo uses the fact that the alleged rape was neither reported to the school or the police as vindication of his innocence and that her claim was vexatious, further bolstered by his (counter-)claim that growing up with only sisters had ‘taught me how to respect females more. A lot, sorry’. Particularly significant was that the story of the rape emerged in response to a general question about his relationship with his parents. For Cairo, ‘they always managed to give me a word or two, which helps me and helped me get out of situations, do you know what I mean? That’s what makes them—to me, that’s what makes them very special’. Cairo recalled their response to the rape accusation:

...I said, ‘I have something to tell you.’ And told—they knew I was a virgin, so they’re like, ‘How is this coming up? She’s lying, how can you rape someone if you’re a virgin? It doesn’t make sense.’ And my parents were like, ‘All I’m going to say is, don’t go on a bite, don’t get angry about it, just leave it. Don’t go to the teachers, don’t talk to the police about it, just leave it.’ I could have gone down the route of going to the teachers and then built up a big case, do you know what I mean? I could have gone down that wrong route. I could have slapped her, and she could have used that against me [sic], do you know what I mean? So, all of that, just from them growing me up and teaching me how to deal with stuff, it just basically stopped me from going to jail...

There is a risk of overreading his parents’ reaction as told by Cairo, but it bears the imprint of an awareness of being positioned through sexual terrorizing, a sanguinity about racist interpellations that are dehumanizing but also disappointingly recognizable. The constancy of the tropes of sexual violence is captured well in Yancy’s (2005: 218) reflexive philosophy where he feels ‘*their* [white people’s] black monster, *their* bogeyman’ is personified in his fear-invoking black male body. His work speaks to the existential impacts of anxious white identities which fragment, brutalize, and deny agency through racist histories which are re-energized in the present. The affective content of this characterization is destructive, wearing, injuring the psychic self on an ongoing basis (see also Phillips 2020). This phenomenology of subjection that counts the psychic costs of ongoing racializing practices for black male bodies has largely escaped criminological attention.

### ‘I was doing fraud at school’: imperializing Merton?

For Mbembe (2017: 103), it is in ‘mobilizing the memory of the colony’ and the ways this produces psychic images even when one has not encountered colonialism directly that we find particularly helpful. It is the colony that frames black people’s subjectivity, and there was certainly some sense of this in Cairo’s talk. More prosaically, Cairo referred to the systemic nature of racial conditions in society as deeply embedded and constraining opportunities in ways that are distinct for different racialized groups. To Cairo’s mind:

the white man made the system, the Asian man, he’s the middleman ... we’re at the bottom of the food chain, they’re going to make it easier for us to slip out. So, when you slip out it’s either jail or something else. So, they made it tighter for us to get somewhere. They make it hard, like even to get a job they make it way harder for us. If you’re white all of a sudden, when you see a white guy dressed in a suit, money, this, that, living life, living good. There’s black people in a suit they’re not making money like that, do we. I wish we did... Discrimination, that’s why

we're at the bottom, so we're going to be poor. I'm not saying there's not white poor people but there's more black people that's poor.

Describing his offending, Cairo observed of computer fraud, 'Literally it fed me, put food in my mouth.' 'Frauding it out', he was able to supplement the family's budget to provide food and household essentials by using his skills to hack into credit card accounts, buying iPhones that were then sold locally. While subsistence prompted Cairo's offending, he was candid about it also facilitating a designer-led, materialist lifestyle of clothes and accessories from expensive brands—'Yes, you feel nice', was how he recalled it. There is an interesting threading of how these consumer items equated to the sustenance of food, when Cairo refers to how he enabled his friends by 'putting food in their mouths as well', furnishing them with material goods to meet their 'starving' appetites. The aesthetic desires that can spark offending behaviour, are, of course, a key tenet of cultural criminology (Ferrell and Sanders 1995).

In Mbembe's (2017) work, there is a fascinating reflection on the cultural violence of colonialism alongside its political-economic dimensions. Disconcertingly, Mbembe argues, the colonized were seduced and enchanted by the fantasy of wealth within an affective economy of objects and goods sold by European slave traders. For Mbembe, these 'erotics of merchandise' could be understood as a form of symbolic fetishization and materialism in which commodities penetrated deep into the core of imperial subjects with subjection being achieved through the priming of a desire for material objects. Bhattacharyya's (2018: 153) recent work also points to a similar conundrum that even those excluded from globalized labour markets can be stupefied by consumerism as 'capitalism infects our dreams' promising the 'object that will fill our lack, make us whole, satisfy our niggling yet unspecific want'. The commodification of difference may operate through commercializing 'cool blackness' or through the promise of skin-lightening creams, she argues, but it also works through animating material desires that are just beyond reach.

This, of course, also fits within a classic Mertonian analysis. This specifies a faltering in the equilibrium between the culturally defined goals of securing material wealth and the 'approved opportunities for legitimate, prestige-bearing pursuit of the culture goals', priming the innovative adaptations of criminal and antisocial conduct (Merton 1938: 679). The satisfaction, status, and worth that comes from conventional employment can so easily be blocked by racist discrimination in the labour market that field experiments and ethnic penalty studies have consistently found for decades (Zwysen *et al.* 2021), thus impeding conformity and vertical mobility (Phillips 2020). The allure of conspicuous consumption for Cairo may be contemporarily understood through the lens of the illusory American dream (Merton), the joys of transgression (Ferrell and Sanders 1995) or the atomized, consumer subjectivities of advanced capitalism (Hall and Winlow 2015). Or we can select and combine the colonial lens employed by Mbembe (2017).

## RAFAN

At the time of the interview, Rafan was a 20-year-old man who described himself as Asian Bangladeshi. He grew up in East London and had been involved in robberies and some serious violence in school which left another young boy in a coma. Consequently, Rafan was embroiled in a protracted but inconclusive court case. He was expelled from school and sent to what he referred to as a 'behaviour school'. Rafan came across as confident and poised in the interview describing how he intended to set up his own security business. At the same time, glimmers of anxiousness came through during moments in his interviews when he appeared to recoil from the implicit intimacies of the interview and was reluctant to reveal too much about his past involvement in violence and petty crime.



### Familial and communal responsibilities

Recognition of the importance of family history and community is prevalent in the writing of subaltern histories (Anderson 2012), and in his interview Rafan actively alluded to this sense of community responsibility by deflecting any potentially negative views of his parents. Rafan's comments about them—which at times seemed to almost reproduce colonial caricatures of conformist South Asian familialism—could be read as distancing them from any responsibility for his involvement in violence. He was keen to present an ideal version of his family:

My parents are, you know, who I am today. They brought me up to be like this, so, there's nothing wrong with me, so my parents are perfect ... Well, you've got to remember something. A father's a grafter, he's outside. A mother's at home, mother brings up the kids. All of us, my brothers and sisters everyone's fine. Everyone's completely perfect and happy in their life. No one's doing nothing wrong, so it just says that my mum brought us up perfectly.

References to the currency of community 'respect' came up repeatedly in Rafan's interview, a concept around which South Asian family descriptions are often anchored (Ballard 1982). Repeated mentions of the ideal of upstanding community perfection are explicit in Rafan's narrative. As the interview unfolded, it was clear that this emphasis may have been to mask the reality of the disruption to the harmonious image Rafan felt he had created in the family because of the violence he was involved in and the ensuing contamination of being involved with the criminal justice system. This was conveyed through the sense in which Rafan felt his whole family had suffered because of his court case. It meant that everyone in his community knew that he had been involved in a violent episode and he was then assumed by the police and his community to be a member of a gang. The shame and corresponding loss of respect he (and his family) felt because of his entanglement in serious violence and the criminal justice system was foregrounded throughout the interview.

The idea of punishment extending beyond the individual and pejoratively linked to families and communities was explicitly developed in colonial India through the Criminal Tribes Act 1871 and became part of routine colonial governance in North India. It constituted in law colonial ideas of native criminality, giving shape and form to Indian identities in the eyes of the colonizing British. Criminalization took a specific form which combined the idea of biological race with that of caste, resulting in a tailored ethnological technique of colonization (Anderson 2004; Brown 2005; Hinchy 2020). Family groups and community kinship networks were proclaimed as 'criminal tribes' and had their names and details recorded on police registers. By Indian independence in 1947, 13 million people were subject to disciplinary and surveillance measures, including through placement in reformatory and agricultural settlements that were similar to prisons and penal colonies, as the population was claimed as moral subjects of the colonial Raj (Nigam 1990). Further indications of the mutually constitutive connectedness of the colony and the metropole (Cooper and Stoler 1989) established by the criminal tribe concept are to be found in British metropolitan anxieties about Gypsies and Victorian ideas of habitual itinerant criminality. The literature depicted 'robber castes' in India which were low caste groups perceived to acquire criminal skills through hereditarily transmitted knowledge (Pillavsky 2015).

This refinement and remoulding of racialized stereotypes of communal, professional criminality during colonial rule influenced the journey and potency of these stereotypes in post-colonial contexts. Labelling whole communities as criminal is arguably a practice that has re-emerged; British Asian Muslims over recent decades have felt as though they are the new 'suspect community', replacing the traditional position of the Irish as the pariah, alien community lurking within the virtuous civil body (Pantazis and Pemberton 2009). Later criminological

analyses of Asian people's involvement in crime claimed Asian people's bonds to their community and religion acted as forms of informal social control (Wardak 2000). This cultural essentialist expectation of compliance appeared in Rafan's interview when he talked about prayer and observing religious fasts like Ramadan, wryly declaring, 'I've never kept all of them [fasts] together... Never have. Can't do it, man.' But Rafan, like Cairo, also asserted an almost primeval connection, noting 'it's in the religion, it's in my blood, it's in my family' and '[t]hese things we learned ... it's just one of them things where you just had to follow, and without it you're lost'. At the same time, Rafan appeared to be caught between who he thought he ought to be—a conforming Muslim man bound by a potent reproduction of the racialized deference and obedience demanded in colonial India—and who he actually was.

### The mutability of colonial stereotypes then and now

As the discussion above highlights, Rafan was adept at presenting different versions of himself that included elements of collusion with cultural stereotypes of obedient and dutiful Asianness. For example, 'respect' and in particular parental respect is a common trope attributed to Asian cultures (Benson 1996). Rafan discussed gratitude and feelings of respect for his parents and siblings often in his story and attributed his desistance from deviance and drive to work and earn money to be because of them:

My mum and dad are respectful. They made me who I am today. If I, if I never had the parents I would have, I probably would have been drug dealing. Like, I'll be honest, like, all my own stuff, I look up to them, like, my older brothers ... it's because of them I'm in work right now. I was out of a job for a couple of months.

Asian cultures in the United Kingdom have been resented, pathologized and idealized and even, on occasion, eulogized, underlining the ambivalence in the way they are perceived and portrayed. For example, the stereotype of Asian culture as simultaneously supportive, oppressive or restrictive is powerfully evocative and yet pliantly altered depending on the argument being advanced (Alexander 2000; Archer 2004). The simplification of different cultural practices is of course not new, and, in the colonies, the heterogeneity of colonized populations was rendered manageable by assigning them racialized classifications. British engagement with Indian societies presented a conceptual difficulty for the colonizers to understand the relationship between the individual and his or her social group (Brown 2005). As Mahmud (1999) describes, imperatives of colonial rule, commercial extraction, and labour exploitation intersected with a grammar of racial difference to create racialized stereotypes that would facilitate legally sanctioned regimes of discipline and control. These stereotypes were contingently deployed to serve the purposes of colonialism.

While Rafan's expression of his own religiosity will have been co-constructed through a range of present-day cultural and social influences, his rehearsal of the colonial stereotypes of Asianness resonates with the reality that the evolution of racialized stereotypes were not subject to a simple, stable binary in which the colonizers created the stereotypes and the colonized were subject to them (Cooper and Stoler 1989; Hall 2002). Colonial masculinities and whiteness emerged from social and personal practices that were constantly rearticulated in accordance with the changing political and economic imperatives of colonial rule, as Sinha (1995) argues in his critique of the portrayal of effeminate, Bengali masculinity. This meant a grammar of difference was continuously and vigilantly crafted as people in colonies refashioned and contested European claims to superiority.

Rafan's response to his exclusion and brush with the potential of going to prison was to pursue work as a security guard, and in his words, he wanted to 'look after people' and 'protect

people'. His pride in obtaining his security licence aged 18 enabled him to make money, and rather like Cairo, he too was seduced by material appeals—for him a more expensive car to match his friends' cars—'I always wanted what they had ... Feel like I'm a part of what they have' was how he referred to this. But Rafan's aspirations seemed also partially linked to a need to assert his masculinity following the criminal investigation that had emasculated him and weakened his trust in friends, some of whom abandoned him because of the incident. Rafan's implicit resort to conventional forms of masculine prowess underlines the need for a nuanced analysis to convey the multiplicity of identity formations amongst racialized groups. The typical framing of Asian men in terms of a 'problem religion' whether that be in terms of riotous behaviour, cultural clashes as with the Salman Rushdie affair, or as sexual predators of white women (Cockbain and Tufail 2020), is self-evidently too narrow, particularly where it does not engage with the continuities between colonial subjects, constructions of whiteness, and immigrant subjectivities (Hesse 2000; Kalra 2009). In Rafan's experiences of a variety of contemporary exclusions, his encounters with the criminal justice system were revealing of its submerged colonial resonance that significantly troubled his sense of self and his place in family relations. Cultural characterizations and representations advanced by British imperialism can be seen to retain their force, partially shaping the lived experience of postcolonial subjects today.

## BARRY

We now turn to an interview with Barry, a white, middle-aged Englishman, interviewed in prison as part of a study of prison social relations (Phillips 2012). Barry's mother had lived in colonial Hong Kong, and he presented an assured middle-class, university-educated, cosmopolitan, sense of self. His narrative interview exposes his reclamation of a white national identity that awkwardly insists on, and resorts to, a Britishness anchored by an imperial, inherently superior whiteness. His whiteness was not one embedded in the abject culture of a working-class habitus, itself often portrayed as having similar negative cultural traits to colonial subjects (Garner 2006). As such, it offers one of too few glimpses into middle-class whiteness with an expatriate veneer. Thus, in Barry's retelling, his mother is positioned not as a migrant worker, but as an expatriate, a status itself generative of privilege imbued with the residue of colonialist hierarchies.<sup>5</sup>

Barry talked frankly about the ambient racism towards black people that was part of his growing up in a white Midlands neighbourhood during the 1970s and 1980s. He was candid about the prejudices he learned and how they were challenged when he moved to multicultural London and started to meet black people. Barry recalls being introduced to 'this enormous black chap', who shook his and his business colleague's hand. Barry noted, 'I remember thinking at the time, I was utterly shocked, I didn't know they could talk properly... I was expecting him to be talking like this "yah bumba twa man"'. It is a recollection that precisely echoes Yancy's (2005) depiction of the white fantasy of the 'black monster'. Barry also had a critical recall of how he and his brother had been taught piano using the Royal Academy of Music syllabus that included *The Coon Song*, a song teeming with colonial hatred and condescension, but Barry remained blissfully unaware of the implicit racism in his dismissive contextualization 'Imagine that now, you'd have a riot!'

### White innocence, guilty states

Barry's financial success in the music business brought an affluence and indifference to administrative rules and regulatory frameworks often found in studies of white-collar crime. Farrall and Karstedt (2020), for example, find the economic morality of the middle classes all

<sup>5</sup> We are grateful to Becky Taylor for this insight.

too easily fuelled by greed, multiple temptations, and a lack of commitment to legal norms. [Sohoni and Rorie \(2019\)](#), moreover, speculate that affluent white people may develop a cognitive framework that results from them typically being geographically isolated from minority ethnic groups and eschewing empathy towards such groups. Their sense of innate entitlement, racial bias, and individual impunity fosters an inclination towards the behaviours associated with white-collar criminality. Barry's whiteness though would remain invisible to the pathologizing purview of the racial frame that so regularly accompanies black people's encounters with the criminal law.

In the interview, Barry declared his favourable economic position offered him the opportunity to effectively retire from work at the age of 25 years. According to him, it was only the vindictive and unjustified pursuit of his wealth by various tax authorities that had been his undoing. He referred to this (mal)administration as 'an English disease and it's taken over', evincing the familiar techniques of neutralization used by white-collar offenders in his sardonic observation, 'All the murderers and rapists are out now, it's only the VAT people still in here [in prison]'. The British state, as the co-ordinating body responsible for his (racialized) criminalization, had become, to Barry, an oppressive, tyrannical force, that fuelled his sense of being a righteous fugitive, an innocent victim of despotic government agencies driven by political correctness. This reading was the flip side of Cairo's stock characterization of an authoritarian state driven by racist imperatives where people like him could never succeed economically and politically.

Some of Barry's remarks exemplified [Wekker's \(2016\)](#) notion of white innocence. White innocence operates strongly at the interpersonal level where white people resent any suggestion that they are beneficiaries of societal structures and institutional practices which provide dividends to them based on their whiteness. In Britain, it frequently manifests as an insistence that British racism is less toxic, less entrenched, and less pervasive than other variants, usually referenced in relation to South Africa or the United States. As such, it offers white British people a comforting and familiar sense of elevation over others, conveniently ignoring Britain's central role in securing the fiction that the white race is superior to all others through the violence of the Empire. White innocence is underwritten by a disavowal of race as a system of human division often expressed as a form of colour-blindness. Indeed, Barry expressed disgust at attempts by the prison to categorize him, noting he recorded his 'ethnic code' as 'a black Afro-Caribbean Chinese cross usually, just to piss them off', and later that '[e]ven mentioning that somebody is Chinese or Norwegian, should be a sackable offence'. This wilful, resentful defiance was fuelled by his opinion that 'pure diversity and lack of racism involves not noticing the other person's diversity, the other person's race'.

Inside the prison, but of course also outside, the instrumental abuse and corruption of race equality principles (once derided as 'political correctness', now 'wokeness') has been the source of much rancour ([Phillips 2012](#)). Vitriolic accusations from white people that minorities played the race/religion card against them were often generated by feelings of powerlessness, anger, and frustration as they encountered prison policies that unsettled the privileges of their majority ethnic invisibility. This was part of a wider racial discourse that saw the 'forgotten white majority' as 'the real victims' of inequality and racism. Enforcing equality efforts in the prison tapped into fears of authoritarian social engineering, manipulation from above and, as such, was deeply resented by many white prisoners. As Barry put it:

Most people's way of being racist these days doesn't involve any racist incidents. It involves trying to accuse the other person of a racist incident. That's how racism is used. And the framework is set up in here and active for people to be able to pursue a racist complaint with no foundation or basis whatsoever.

A narrative around ‘reverse racism’ was a powerful tool in white hands. It inhibits effective anti-racism by implying racial hierarchies, institutions, and social practices established over the course of several centuries can be simply flipped over into reverse, as if they were nothing more than an inconvenient symmetry of colour rather than the contours of colonial power.<sup>6</sup>

Barry’s hostility to the British tax authorities did not, however, entirely cancel his assertive nationalist/cosmopolitan identity which recurred in several parts of his interview. Barry’s account seemed to bear the hallmarks of what Mbembe (2017) calls the ‘psychic component of the consciousness of empire’ which manifests as a dislocated sense of white ascendancy. This is a collective sense of disorientation arising from the forfeit of an unacknowledged superior status, and the accompanying benefits of ethnic invisibility. For Barry, the confusions, complicities, and complexities of multiple, mutable ethnicities managed by the prison administration through intrusive diversity policies, confronted the familiar comforts of the white privilege he had enjoyed in the ‘free world’ through which he travelled widely. He spoke of his erstwhile comforts with pride and at length. Middle-class white identities in the United Kingdom have always been rooted in a sense of cosmopolitan superiority derived from power exercised over racialized or classed subordinates. The loss of some of that power, at both a national and a personal level, is lodged in the growing fear that Britain is a declining power in the global order of the 21st century, and Barry registered this anxiety-infused melancholia in his account of prisoner social relations (Gilroy 2004). Prisons are, of course, firmly anchored to the establishment of the modern state that emerged through the colonial period. They are evocative of what John Stuart Mill (1862: 11) identified as the colonies-facing aspect of liberal statehood in which a ‘vigorous despotism is in itself the best mode of government for training the people ... to render them capable of a higher civilization’. The irony here is that it is Barry, the white beneficiary, who forcefully defies the colonial promise of ‘a higher civilization’ offered by prison equalities policies. The days of Empire are still ending, and it is a drawn-out, traumatic, and bewildering process, marked by bitter opposition (Gilroy 2004; Bhattacharyya *et al.* 2021). A symptomatic reading of Barry’s interview highlights some of the work that must be done to make postcolonial critiques of whiteness matter more in criminological research.

## CONCLUSION

Our objective in this paper has been to make an *empirically grounded* contribution to the developing theoretical literature on decolonizing criminology. We have sought to move between and connect the macro of historical and contemporary racial orders, the primary lens of Southern and decolonizing criminologies, and the micro of individual experience mediated through the meso lens of state institutions. To develop understanding we have threaded together disparate literatures—in particular, Mbembe’s postcolonial theory, Hall’s sociology, C. Anderson’s history and Yancy’s philosophy—that speak to questions of violence, social order, control, punishment, and justice, in the colonial past and postcolonial present. In this endeavour, we maintain as does Wolfe (2016: 83) that ‘race is colonialism speaking’, but also that the 21st-century habitus within which postcolonial lives are lived is not as far removed from British 19th-century coloniality as might be assumed.

Life history and biographical narrative analysis facilitated the filigree tracing of affect that weaved race around and deep into situated lived experiences and biographical trajectories. The hallmarks of racialized thinking were evident in Cairo, Rafan, and Barry’s stories, as they

6 Just as Giddens (1999) has referred to globalization as ‘reverse colonialization’.

reflected on their different social realities. Race and coloniality are not the only lens through which their lived experiences were narrated—most obviously because political-economic structures shaped their socio-economic positions—but they were nonetheless a significant one. The transnational, yet glocalised referents of family protection, ethnic and religious identities, diaspora, the dynamics of informal and formal social control at play, were revealing of racializing processes that were variously enacted. For black men such as Cairo, the postcolonial reverberations hark back to a rigid characterization of predatory violence, greed, and an inability to defer gratification which has also now morphed into consumerist desires. Cairo's excessive masculinity, always representable as sexually violent, hemmed him into always being characterized as the familiar black monster. In the case of Rafan, the motifs of familial and communal responsibility and respect dominate but rub up against masculinities in which violence retains its force and cultural appeal. Both serve to circumscribe life in racialized masculine terms, to preclude an unencumbered belonging to Britain, through the still-potent legacy of demeaning colonial relations that has deep existential effects.

The embodiment of a sociopolitical positioning rooted in the Empire's racial hierarchies was as evident in Barry's narrative as it was in Cairo's and Rafan's. Despite the persistent disavowal of race and racism among white people who mistakenly feel they have little connection to *their* colonial history; disowning whiteness can be more complex than denouncing it. The once firm, but always contested colonial foundations of the United Kingdom are anchored to a political sensibility in Britain that sees itself as Great by virtue of its historical, geopolitical positioning, and its emblematic and hegemonic whiteness (Gilroy 2004). This is a whiteness that continues to inferiorize and marginalize minority ethnic Britons through longstanding cultural tropes of inherent violent criminality, suspicious intrusion, and obsequious subservience, and in which masculinities are racialized in very particular ways. This does not detract from a recognition that whiteness itself must be intersectionally deconstructed to acknowledge its own internal hierarchies by class, religion, nation (and gender). Thus, Barry's narrative was marked by a self-assured, expatriate white supremacy, that eschewed governmental efforts to promote racial equality.

While colonial ambitions may have lost some of their identifiable presence in the vocabulary of European political discourse, 'imperial durabilities', to use Stoler's (2016) term, are just that. These formations are protean and can extend and resurface long after the entanglements in the colonies have officially been rescinded. However, we do not suggest a simplistic linear trajectory or crude causative chains, but instead argue that the classificatory habits of the Empire resurface in the contemporary moment if we care to look and listen for them. Using the three life history and biographical narratives of Cairo, Rafan, and Barry, we have connected the personal and the political and located the colonial in the biographical.

It may seem trite to repeat Baldwin's (1958/1998) claim, but our main argument in this paper is precisely that 'people are trapped in history and history is trapped inside them'. In *Stranger in the Village*, Baldwin wrote both as an American in Europe and a black man in a white landscape. From this facility of double outsiderhood, he invites the reader to interrogate race biographically, situating lived experiences within sociopolitical histories. Where we disagree with Baldwin's assessment is that Europe's black and brown possessions, even then, were a 'comfortingly abstract' issue for European identities. Following the UK's exit from the European Union, the Windrush scandal, and amidst current policy proposals to move the seekers of political asylum to Rwanda (Home Office 2022), a country with its own European colonialist histories, we are reminded that colonial relations are neither spatially, temporally, or politically linear. An anti-racist future requires us to, at the very least, draw attention to these imperial durabilities, and we hope we have contributed to that work here.

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