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# Tackling whiteness as a decolonizing task in contemporary criminology

*Rod Earle*

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White people have not always been ‘white’, nor will they always be ‘white’. It is a political alliance. Things will change.

Amoja Three Rivers (Epigraph in Roediger, 1997)

## **Contexts and introduction: an English tableau from the 2020s**

In June 2020, a large metal statue of the slave trader Edward Colston was pulled off its plinth in the city of Bristol and dumped by an angry crowd into the river that runs through the town and out to sea. I want to gather thoughts and ideas around that incident to frame my analysis of how a better understanding of whiteness might help the decolonizing task facing criminology and criminologists. In part, this is an act of tribute, a salute to the courage in the crowd that facilitated this action, but by describing this and another incident routed through Britain’s criminal justice system I hope to show how whiteness reverberates through society. Like the ambient hum of an air-conditioning system, it is, for most white people, something that is only brought to awareness when it is interrupted, as it was in Bristol. By amplifying and exposing aspects of whiteness, I hope to demonstrate its pervasive but often unnoticed presence to foster better resistance to racism and build dissent against the crimes of white supremacy.

In May 2020, the Black Lives Matter (BLM) campaign reignited and went global after white police officers in the US were filmed killing George Floyd, a Black man they had arrested on suspicion of using a counterfeit banknote in his hometown of Minneapolis. A few weeks later, in June 2020, young people called a BLM protest in the town that I live in (just outside London) and I found myself painting placards with my daughter. Together with my partner, we joined a large crowd of mostly young white people marching through a town that probably thought of itself as a stranger to racial malice. That was the first white privilege to take a hit.

A few days later, television screens across the world relayed dramatic pictures from Bristol – a port city in the West of England with a large Black community dating back to its historic association with the slave trade. Decades of local campaigning for the removal of Colston’s statue had exhausted all the conventional democratic channels. Inspired by the gathering international momentum of BLM protests, anger and organization teamed up and a large crowd cheered as he was pulled from his plinth, dragged to the dockside and dumped in the Bristol Channel.

Some days later, the statue was pulled up from the bottom of the dock, the same dock where boats Colston had sponsored left for West Africa to collect their cargo of Black men, women, and children who were sold into slavery in Britain's Caribbean colonies. Colston's riches and reputation for philanthropy were the results of cramming more than 100,000 people into his boats to maximize the profit he would make when the survivors were sold as slaves. As these people were sold, the initials of Colston's Royal African Company (RAC) were branded on their chests to signify their status as property rather than people. I am glad that the first time I see Colston's statue it is horizontal in a Bristol museum, dented and daubed with profanities. Its work as a monument is undone and remade, unsettled and reclaimed, as the copious museum notation surrounding the display makes clear. A small decolonizing of space and thought has been triggered.

In January 2022, four young white people are acquitted of committing criminal damage to the statue by a jury in Bristol. Their defence was to situate their actions in the context of history as a contested rather than received narrative and to argue that the continued presence of the statue in Bristol amounted to an 'indecent display' they were justified in removing. The jury's decision to accept this defence was greeted with hostility and outrage in the right-wing and nationalist UK media.

In August 2021, a young white man was sentenced at Leicester Crown Court for downloading 67,788 documents from neo-Nazi, white supremacist, and antisemitic websites. The police described him as a white supremacist with Nazi sympathies and he was charged with possessing a record of information likely to be useful to a person committing or preparing an act of terrorism under section 58 of the Terrorism Act. In court, after considering reports, the judge in the case opted for a suspended custodial sentence, but it was the judge's remarks in court that propelled the case into the newspapers. He suggested the 21-year-old man's actions amounted to 'teenage folly' and ordered that he be returned to court in four months where the judge himself would test his reading of a personally recommended list of authors, saying to the young man "have you read Dickens? Austen? Start with *Pride and Prejudice* and Dickens's *A Tale Of Two Cities*. Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*. Think about Hardy. Think about Trollope." (Barnes, 2021; Earle, 2021; Tickell 2021). Despite evidence of the young man's sustained involvement in neo-Nazi activities, the increasing frequency of lethal attacks by white supremacists in the UK, Germany, Norway, the US, and New Zealand, and evidence of the increasing traction of fascist ideology across Europe, the judge did not sense the threats in his actions. Rather than recognize the huge reservoirs of white racial animosity that sustained the young man's interests, he felt sorry for him and found him a pitiable individual; he identified with him. He saw a young, vulnerable white man and diagnosed that a misplaced sense of racial identity required gentle redirection toward the patron saints of English whiteness, as represented by the pantheon of classical English literature – Charles Dickens, Jane Austen, Thomas Hardy, and William Shakespeare. In January 2022, three appeal court judges quashed the sentence and imposed an immediate custodial sentence on the young man after protests from anti-racist organizations. What alarmed and angered me at the time of the original sentence were comments from UK criminologists on social media commending the judge's bravery for resisting an immediate punitive prison sentence in favour of a 'creative' non-custodial alternative (see Earle, 2021) ignoring and erasing the racial connotations of the whiteness of all the protagonists.

This short tableau of scenes in the UK where race, racism, and colonial history made headline news is presented to offer an indicative insight into characteristic features of whiteness that, even now, are rarely part of criminology's broadening gaze. In the following sections, I explore some of the theoretical, conceptual, and practical challenges faced by criminologists in the UK, but mainly in England, as we seek to reconcile our practice with the white

imperial legacies (Stoler, 2016) of the discipline. Race, racism, and colonialism are “marked by specialisations” (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 21) and varieties of denial, deflection, and avoidance of these historical features, including their locational specifics, often manifest in British criminology as casual deference to the US ‘pariah’ account of racism. The racial dynamics of the US carceral apocalypse dominate teaching and scholarly outputs at the expense of more direct and sustained engagement with British and European colonial legacies (Phillips et al., 2019). Among many theoretical and practical deficiencies, this completely fails to develop meaningful anti-colonial solidarity by reinforcing tendencies within whiteness toward an empty politics of virtue and “moves to innocence” (Malwhinney as cited in Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 3; see also Wekker, 2016). Recognizing these tendencies in my own practice, I begin by outlining some of my understanding and misunderstandings of racism.

### **Racism, whiteness, coloniality**

Racism – and its corollary of race – delivers an understanding of global humanity as a hierarchy with white people and cultures of European heritage at the top. With the logic of race, the position of white people and cultures is presented as a ‘natural’ or ‘innocent’ superiority arising from various combinations of innate biological characteristics and meritocratic cultural ascendancy. Racism and race, therefore, represent an enduring and profound 400-year-old crisis in the narration of what it means to be human and how we can think about human life on Earth. Race appears to offer a resolution to that weighty and persistent existential puzzle – who are we? – and does it on a unifying planetary scale such that race and anti-black violence, which inevitably accompanies such a concept (Mbembe, 2017), become central to the very idea of global order (Barder, 2021). It is sustained at the level of personal experience to become part of the general ‘grid of intelligibility’ structuring our sense of the human (Hall, 1996; Smith, 2016). As the various European colonial projects developed, race became *the* vernacular for human difference – the language of colonization (Turda & Quine, 2018). It is no exaggeration to think of the emergence of a racial imaginary as Copernican in scale and consequence (Barder, 2021). As Du Bois (2007a, 2007b) was quick to notice, the driving force behind the twentieth-century colour line was “the new religion of whiteness sweeping the world” (Lake & Reynolds, 2008, n.p.). Race has become the structuring regime of the modern world, the decisive antagonism that has shaped the world I live in, and my own life tells me so.

Although I was born in Ghana, Africa’s first postcolonial nation, in 1958, for the first five decades of my life, my whiteness was largely invisible to me because I lived all but the first three years of those decades in an England that was only slowly recognizing itself as multicultural. Had I lived in Ghana, the ‘fact’ of my whiteness would have been, literally, self-evident and problematic to varying degrees (see Pierre, 2013 for how race, colonial whiteness and its legacy structure Ghanaian society). My Irish nationality, via my father’s, was not a choice but a necessity. At primary school in 1968, I was deemed ineligible for inclusion in a group UK passport to visit France when my birthplace in Accra was declared on the application documents. My mother was shocked to learn that because she had failed to register my foreign birth as required under the 1914 British Nationality and Status of Aliens Act, I was formally an unregistered alien. An Irish passport was more readily and quickly available because Ireland had no such registration requirement and my status as an ‘alien’ was thus short-lived and easily resolved. Another of the variable privileges of whiteness.

These small biographical details have slowly, belatedly, alerted me to the contingencies of whiteness (Baker, 2021) because of their explicit connection to racial narratives, either in terms of the primacy of natality (you are defined by where you were born) or the colonial otherness of

Irishness. Growing up in England from the age of three, I was shielded from racialization by the way whiteness is evacuated from the racial equation. It was only much later in life – as I turned 50 – when I started to work with a Black/mixed-race academic on questions of race, ethnicity, and identity (Phillips & Earle, 2010) that I felt the need to theorize whiteness rather than simply live within it. That was another white privilege that needed to take a hit.

Most privileges are largely invisible to people who enjoy them, as I discovered relatively early in life – during the 1970s and 1980s – when it came to some of the privileges of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1987). Women I knew and respected and women I loved were active in feminism and were theorizing their activism around the slogan ‘the personal is political’ because of men’s political indifference to it and their continual exposure to its repetitive, persistent, and sometimes violent hypocrisies. I learned how ‘normal life’, everyday life, was imbued with gender dynamics, hierarchies of value, and patterns of practice that required change. Liberation was the term some feminists used. Often, these liberation struggles included a socialist register that anchored the fight for equality, justice, and freedom in the oppressive and exploitative class structure of capitalist society. But in these relationships with white women, the dynamics of race and racism did not surface or call me to change or understand my privileges because I felt as innocent of its structures as I did of its practices. The last thing I thought of myself as was a white supremacist. I felt no direct personal equivalence in my alignment with whiteness, the dominant position of the racial order and my alignment with women’s refusal of the patriarchal classification of their lives and being. My critical awareness of the racial order was not accompanied by the same sense of obligation to recognize its dividends (whiteness), resist its tyrannies, and disinvest in its mechanism. This is not an uncommon failure among white people. As Táiwò (2022) argues, the identity politics pioneered by the Combahee River Collective and other Black feminists in the 1970s and 1980s were widely taken up by white feminists in the women’s movement but with the positionalities of race largely abandoned (Ware, 2005). New theorizations of intersectionality, developed again largely by Black feminists (Crenshaw et al., 2019), have resisted these erasures and sought to reverse their evacuations, only to find their theorization once more being ‘de-raced’ as their insistence on the combination and intersecting vectors of power is misrepresented, co-opted or recuperated by more singular interests around gender or class (Jonsson, 2020), as if these can ever exist independently of race. This reflects the way that – across Europe and the US – a powerful, reactionary, right-wing, and racist political culture has secured a widespread ascendancy in which struggles for racial justice have become stagnant, particularly among white people and white majority nations (Meer, 2022; Valluvan, 2019). Personal commitments to challenging racism and accepting that it secures benefits for white people at the expense of Black people have been ridiculed and caricatured as ‘political correctness’ or ‘woke culture’ rather than being embraced as part of the difficult work of undoing the colonial and seeking to become something as simple as a decent human being. The momentum developed by BLM challenged this inertia.

In the next section, I try to explore white people’s orientations to colonialism in the UK by engaging with some of George Orwell’s work. I seek to show how George Orwell made contributions to anti-colonial analysis that are somewhat overshadowed by his iconic status as the author of the classic dystopian fictions *1984* and *Animal Farm*.

### **An ‘evil state of affairs’: white acquiescence and ‘abolishing part of myself’**

George Orwell’s insights on colonialism are worth revisiting in the convivial sense of returning to something with further social and radical intentions to renew theory (Gilmore–Wilson,

2022). In 1937, before World War II and the British Empire's slow collapse began to gather pace, Orwell (1962) wrote:

Under the capitalist system in order that England may live in comparative comfort, a hundred million Indians must live on the verge of starvation – an evil state of affairs, but you acquiesce in it every time you step into a taxi or eat a plate of strawberries and cream.  
(p. 140)

Orwell was writing just six years before the worst famine in Indian history devastated British-ruled West Bengal in 1943/1944, killing nearly two million people, and nearly 100 years after An Gorta Mór, 'the great hunger' of 1845–1852, in British-ruled Ireland, where about one million people died and a population of eight million was reduced to six million through emigration, setting a diasporic pattern familiar to many colonized nations. In March 2021, the Irish government announced that the population of the island of Ireland had for the first time exceeded that of 1851. Colonial violence casts a very long shadow.

Orwell's brief service in the colonial police in Burma had alerted him to the long-standing, exploitative and extractive basis of Britain's imperial projects. He goes on, in his next sentence, to briefly consider the implications of the impoverishment that might accompany the reversal of Britain's colonial ascendancy. "The alternative is to throw the Empire overboard and reduce England to a cold and unimportant little island where we should have to work very hard and live mainly on herrings and potatoes" (Orwell, 1962, p. 140).

Orwell's understanding of Britain's class structure and politics is sharpened by his personal experience of both its domestic and imperial dimensions. After five years in the Indian police force, he spat, "I hated the imperialism I was serving with a bitterness which I can probably not make clear" (Orwell, 1962, p. 145). Orwell knew that having been a working part of the imperial machine provided him with special insights into its mechanics and sentiments, insights into the differences of life in the metropole of empire (London, England, Britain) and in the colonies (India, Africa, the Caribbean, Aotearoa New Zealand, Australia). The enduring myth of Britain's civilizing mission was transparently false to him because of his first-hand knowledge of its brutality, sadism, and double-dealing. He was acutely aware that the elevated material position of the British state in world affairs was the product of exploitation, economic extraction, and systemic violence on a global scale. In 1939, on the outbreak of war in Europe, he addressed his readers among the left wing of British politics, berating them for their insular neglect of capitalism's global reach: "What we forget is that the overwhelming bulk of the British proletariat does not live in Britain but in Asia and Africa [...]. This is the system we all live on." (Orwell, 1968, p. 397). For Orwell, the prospects of reckoning with racial capitalism were so profound as to be existentially threatening. He could see that the abolition of extracting profit from across the colonies would mean more than a few "uncomfortable changes" (Orwell, 1962, p. 142) to some ingrained habits in Britain. Orwell recognized that for the average white middle-class person, the abolition of Empire and the abolition of the class system involved "abolishing part of oneself" (Orwell, 1962, p. 142).

I find this diagnosis persuasive for being constructively unsettling in ways that are consistent with those identified by Tuck and Yang (2012) in their examination of the way decolonization is sometimes recuperated and disarmed as a simple metaphor for generic change. By identifying the ontological implications of anti-colonial struggle and how it affects our sense of being in the world, Orwell's analysis connects both to Fanon's legacy of anti-colonial analysis and to feminist concerns to link the personal to the political. However, for Orwell, its implications would simply propel radical politics in Britain into a cul-de-sac because a political programme

“asking us to commit suicide” (Orwell, 1962, p. 148) would encounter a variety of relatively predictable presentational problems (Robbins, 2017). Orwell’s gloomy prognosis was overtaken by the triumph of European fascism in Germany, Italy, and Spain, which triggered a war that engulfed much of the planet. After the war, as the colonies of various European states in Africa and Asia asserted their determination to reclaim their own futures rather than simply provision Europe’s, the issue of who and what needed to be abolished was largely displaced by the Cold War until the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989. This signalled the historic closure of the post-war impasse between labour and capital in favour of capital and the global ascendancy of its neoliberal form.

If you are a criminologist in the UK, the prospect of working in ‘a cold and unimportant little island’ off the northern coast of western Europe has been gathering pace since the vote in 2016 to leave the European Union, even if the diet of herring and potatoes has not. Seen by many as an act of national self-harm, this rupture was accomplished not by radical leftists inspired by George Orwell realizing that imperial abolition offered a new future and constructive departure from the present, but by opportunist Conservatives keen to guide the UK back to greatness, back to Great Britain. The ultra-nationalist UK government of 2022 is an alliance determined to celebrate British imperialism and reinvent its past as a viable future even though the prospects of doing so without the sustained violence and overwhelming force that delivered the supremacy and riches of the eighteenth, nineteenth, and half the twentieth century are not so much remote as profoundly delusional. The fact that the ‘front bench’ (political leadership) of the Conservative party is the most ethnically diverse to ever sit in the palace of Westminster,<sup>1</sup> cannot conceal Brexit as a politics of forlorn white revival built largely on the seductive perversities of colonial disavowal, wilful race blindness, and imperial hubris. This is explored next.

### **‘When they see us’: criminal justice, white optics, black lives**

Historically, racism coincides with and underpins the global reach of colonialism. It establishes a hierarchical conceptualization of an unfolding humanity, effectively inventing an exclusive and excluding concept of the individual ‘man of property’. Thinking with race and seeing with race offers an unprecedented conceptual unification of the self, the body, and the world of property relations (Raengo, 2013). It resonates powerfully with a colonial project that has always insisted on its global ambitions to own the world in the name of whiteness. Du Bois (2007b) identified this trajectory as tipping Europe into the first imperial war of the twentieth century.

Whiteness was the primary ontological vehicle for propelling the colonial ambition to make a world whole in its civilizational image of itself. As Fanon (1967) explains, it provides a way of being in the world (ontology) that corresponds with a sense of self (identity), the body (physicality and embodiment) and a place, the whole new world – planet Earth. In this totality, it has no equivalent and can have no alternative. It simply needs not to be. Decolonization cannot be to colonization what atheism is to religion, a critique anchored in the conceptual terminology it seeks to transcend. As Tuck and Yang (2012) argue, decolonization must retain its fundamental incommensurability and decline the temptations of commensuration (Espeland & Stevens, 1998), of being reduced to the terminology, trajectory, and practice of the colonial imagination.

But for that to happen, it needs to be properly understood. One of the ways this can happen in criminology – and perhaps a helpful starting point – is for white criminologists to recognize the way whiteness as a racial identity derives its meaning and power not from being a phenotypical description but a social construct engineered to reproduce inequality, a construct they

are party to maintaining. The actuality of whiteness is a basic fact that Black authors have been writing about since at least 1830 when David Walker penned *Whites as Heathens and Christians* (Roediger, 1997). The continued neglect of Du Bois's oeuvre (Morris, 2015) and its segregation into various subfields of sociology or criminology foster this acquired ignorance of whiteness among white scholars. As Roediger (1997) notes "the tendency of many [white] writers to believe that 'whiteness studies' is a recent creation in which white scholars have pioneered runs directly counter to [the evidence]" (p. x). Walker (1992) puts it simply when one of her fictional characters observes, "No, no [...] [t]hey behave this way not because I'm black but because they are white" (p. 38).

As Roediger (1997) insists, Black people have been thinking and writing about white people and whiteness for a very long time but the exclusive arrogance of whiteness is to dismiss this fact because it does not correspond with the blackness of their imagination. The fact is, Black people have always needed to 'read' whiteness and white people's behaviour, not least to more safely navigate its various terrors and entrapments. Bell hooks (1997) describes the ability and preference of white people to imagine "that black people cannot see them" as an illusion that is at once durable, powerful, and fragile, indicative of a profound fear of actually being seen, of knowing there is something to be seen – whiteness.

While the consequences of racialized visibility are a matter in plain sight to non-white people, they are amplified to life-threatening, life-reducing, and life-denying effects by criminal justice. The title of Ava Du Vernay's Netflix series *When They See Us* attests to the ubiquity of this truth among Black Americans. It tells the story of five New York teenagers arrested in 1989 and convicted for a rape they did not commit. Brutalized, abused, and incarcerated, they were only exonerated after years of campaigning exposed the lies and calculating corruption of white police officers and white prosecutors who could not and would not concede their actions were driven by racial animosity. To varying degrees of lethality mediated by national specificities (UK police officers are usually unarmed), these dynamics operate in the racial differentials and disproportionalities encountered in the UK's criminal justice system. The phrase 'when they see us' has an international semantic utility (Raengo, 2013), i.e., something of its kind has been in use from the Dutch and English slave forts built along the coast of West Africa in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to the streets of twenty-first-century London, where stop-and-search operations target young Black people at a rate nine times higher than their white counterparts (Dodd, 2020).

So, whiteness is about skin colour, but it is not just about skin colour. It is better understood as a shifting position in a set of social relations established by colonialism. This recurring, relational positionality comes to mind in the UK where terms such as White Irish or Anglo-Irish have varying connotations of whiteness, coloniality, resistance, and relative privilege – various kinds of alignments with white supremacy. Whiteness in other countries will have other variants and combinations (Baker, 2021; Kalmar, 2022). For example, the field of Hispanic whiteness studies now differentiates itself from the studies of Lusophone whiteness, which derives from features of Portuguese colonialism (Persánch, 2020). Matache (2017) discusses how some Roma people in Europe deploy the concept of 'gadjo-ness' (white privilege) to refer to how their experience of racialization and othering operates against the conventions of dominant white norms. Thus, whiteness is neither an epidermal nor a racial fact indicating fixed physical characteristics. Whiteness is about the way the accumulated cultural capital of certain 'modern', 'civilized' people – usually associated with some kind of European heritage – operates with a distinctive social dividend, sometimes referred to as white privilege.

Asking (demanding?) white criminologists to explain and develop understandings of whiteness is important because the central principle of racism is the *superiority* of the white race,



although this goes largely without saying (among white people). It is important because the prevailing theoretical and empirical literature on white identities reveals that one of their determining characteristics is the claim of invisibility and irrelevance which implies the disavowal of race, colourblindness, and other varieties of post-racial nonsense (Garner, 2007). For most of the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries the idea of being part of – and talking about belonging to – ‘the white race’ was mainstream, uncontroversial, and integral not only to the rhetoric of the major political powers of Europe and the US but people’s everyday experience. This is because for much of the nineteenth and twentieth century, race – just as much as states or nations – was seen as one of humanity’s foundational *political* units (Barder, 2021; Lake & Reynolds, 2008; Vitalis, 2015) and the main way of making sense of one’s place in the world. When white scholars neglect whiteness they implicitly de-racialize themselves as part of the ascendant white majority, saying in effect, ‘race does not exist, we want no part of it’, even as the various benefits surround them. As a result, race becomes other people’s business and other people’s experience. The whiteness of mainstream academic activity in criminology, and other disciplines, is rendered invisible. I close this section by indicating some dimensions and characteristics of white criminology in action.

### ***White criminology: part one***

Gresham Sykes’s landmark study of prison sociology, *The Society of Captives*, was published in 1958 and, in 2018, a 60th-anniversary symposium, *Sykes at 60*, was called by the Cambridge Centre for Criminology to celebrate and reflect on his work. I was thrilled to receive an invitation to participate. Aware that my invitation rested on my participation in Coretta Phillip’s (2018) landmark prison study, I shared the invitation with her, indicating that I had accepted after establishing with the organizers that Coretta had been invited but declined due to other commitments. Coretta congratulated me but had seen something I had not. Every contributor on the proposed timetable was white and there was no reference to race or racism in the outlined programme tracing developments in the US penal field since Sykes’ book was published. The event typified nearly everything Coretta and other scholars of colour found difficult in criminology’s approach to race – white academics inviting other white academics to talk about white academics’ work while being oblivious to the whiteness of it all. With the intensification of the US prison system’s notoriously racialized characteristics over the preceding 60 years, the omission of Black people’s experience from the draft programme notes and the platform should have been unthinkable. Instead, the unsuccessful attempt to engage a leading UK scholar on racialized imprisonment produced a lucky break for me as well as a powerful example of white innocence and privilege. Belatedly recognizing my complicity, I signalled my intention to withdraw from the conference because an all-white platform of academics talking about a white American scholar was likely to reproduce aspects of the whiteness that sustained the appalling racialized dynamics of the US penal system. To their credit, the organizers redoubled their efforts to invite a Black US scholar and on the day two such speakers gave the most powerful and lucid critical accounts of the US penal nightmare, Sykes’ position in its trajectory, and carefully detailed the deadly and life-denying racial currents pulsing through its penal horrors (Miller, 2021). What was a revelation to me (whiteness, blindness, complicity) was simply another routine, wearying example of the injuries of race that afflict Black and racially minoritized scholars in criminology in the UK. The same academic currents that lifted me drag against them. That force also consists in the good intentions of white scholars, such as myself, who seek out over-burdened, under-rewarded Black scholars to fix the problems of whiteness. We can only reduce it by taking whiteness seriously.

### **White criminology: part two**

In November 2021, three white British criminologists – associated with a current of critical criminology to which they refer as ‘ultra-realist’ – published ‘A Critical Assessment of the Black Lives Matter Movement in Britain’ in the inaugural edition of the *Journal of Contemporary Crime, Harm and Ethics* (see Hodgkinson et al., 2021). Intemperate and indulgent of weak scholarship, narrow and partisan in content, it serves as a convenient exemplar of tendencies in white criminology in the UK. It displays the characteristic resentments, projections, and acquired, indignant ‘performative ignorance’ of whiteness (Ware, 2008). It includes a superficial and selective dismissal of Critical Race Theory (CRT), the customary (false) accusations of the neglect of social class analysis and the charge of inadequate theorization of neoliberalism. Typical of its confusions and insecurities is the customary pre-emptive defence that “some CRT scholars may dismiss our argument because we are three white, male academics”, a practice they rebut with the assertion “our ethnic background is irrelevant”, adding, lest they be misunderstood, that they surely embody “Martin Luther King’s assertion that we ought to focus on the content of one’s character and not the colour of their skin” (Hodgkinson et al., 2021, p. 92). Discussing slavery, they echo, approvingly, the Conservative government’s discredited report on race in the UK that claimed slavery had the under-recognized ‘benefit’ of demonstrating the enormous resilience of Black communities. The authors accuse BLM of neglecting wider histories of enslavement and ignoring evidence that “white Europeans were taken to Africa to be sold as slaves” (Hodgkinson et al., 2021, p. 93). Their account deploys neo-fascist myths of equivalence (Finchelstein, 2020) and Islamophobic accounts that protest “the European experience of slavery has been almost entirely forgotten today” because “[b]arbaric coast corsairs also enslaved white Europeans to sell in slave markets in the middle east” (Hodgkinson et al., 2021, p. 94). The citation used to support this feverishly repeated theme is a contrarian journalist, Simon Webb, whose book, *The Forgotten Slave Trade*, is listed in the references without its full inflammatory title, *The White European Slaves of Islam*.

The authors claim their approach is popular and enjoys growing support among the increasing number of criminology students in their universities (J. Treadwell, personal communication, 20 December 2021) but other approaches are possible that depend less on the energetic erection and clumsy demolition of flimsy straw figures.

### **For the end of whiteness and the future of conviviality with or without criminology**

By contrast, for example, when BLM protestors pulled Colston from his plinth and dumped him in the Bristol dock, new vistas were opened, histories of racism were exposed, and questions were asked. Criminology has a role in building on those questions. It cannot do it without Fanon and the wider traditions of Black radicalism, anti-colonialism, and conviviality (Johnson & Lubin, 2017; Ndlovu-Gatsheni & Ndlovu, 2022; Steiner, 2021). It might do worse than start with an adaptation of three of Aimé Césaire’s (1972) four opening arguments about civilization in his essay ‘Discourse on Colonialism’:

A [criminology] that proves incapable of solving the problems it creates is a decadent [criminology].

A [criminology] that chooses to close its eyes to its most crucial problems is a stricken [criminology].

A [criminology] that uses its principles for trickery and deceit is a dying [criminology].

(p. 31)

Every form of politics rests to some extent on an ontology – on a theory of human being. For Fanon (1967), this emerges from active engagement in struggles for social transformation and building institutions and ideas that nourish and liberate the formerly colonized. What is needed is a criminology guided by Fanon’s radical humanism, a humanism made – in Césaire’s (1972) illuminating phrase – “to the measure of the world” (p. 73). This world is not the one measured out in the white judge’s fantasy of civilizational instruction, through the eyes of Charles Dickens, Jane Austen, Thomas Hardy, and William Shakespeare. This is merely coloniality in everyday microcosm.

Fanon (1967) is clear that there can be no personal solution to the problem of whiteness, no question of ‘abolishing oneself’, as Orwell imagined. What is required is ‘a restructuring of the world’ in which colonial paradigms are transcended rather than merely inverted. Over 100 years have passed since Du Bois gestured at the whiteness of the colonial world by suggesting that:

[Although] we may sympathize with world-wide efforts for moral reform and social uplift, but before them all we must place those efforts which aim to make humanity not the attribute of the arrogant and the exclusive, but the heritage of all... in the world where most are colored.

(Du Bois as cited in Gilroy, 2005, p. 38)

We can only shatter the connection built and sustained across four centuries between race and Western European notions of civilization and human difference by evolving a critical conviviality where conceptions of personhood are not anchored in hierarchies of power. For a capacious discipline like criminology, this involves white criminologists making room and giving up space, becoming more hospitable and cherishing alternative social imaginaries (Cunneen & Tauri, 2016). If decolonization is to change anything and everything, we must, to paraphrase Ben Okri (1997, p. 5), “in some way or another breach or confound the frontier of things” and accept that criminology, like Colston’s statue, may not survive the process. In Bristol, the people are deciding what, if anything, to put on the plinth.

## Note

- 1 The names of Sajid Javid (Sec. of State for Health and Social Care), Rishi Sunak (Chancellor of the Exchequer), Priti Patel (Home Secretary), Alok Sharma (International Development Secretary) and Kwasi Kwarteng (Minister for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy) [in June 2022] indicate the colonial provenance of their family backgrounds, while the sixth minority ethnic member of the Cabinet, James Cleverly, is mixed race, having a mother from Sierra Leone and a white British father. Rishi Sunak’s private wealth, along with that of his wife Akshata Murthy, make him the richest Chancellor in British history.

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