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Colonial Confessions: An Autoethnography of Writing Criminology in the New South Africa

Bill Dixon[*]

[*]B. Dixon, School of Sociology and Social Policy, University of Nottingham, University Park, Nottingham NG7 2RD, UK; email: william.dixon@nottingham.ac.uk

This article is an autoethnographic account of a 20-year engagement with South African criminology. It is written from the perspective of someone from the Global North, a beneficiary of Britain's colonial past and the present dominance of northern ways of thinking and being. The aim is to encourage other criminologists from a similar background to reflect on their histories and the impact of their work in the present, and to be open to ideas from outside the Euro-American mainstream of the discipline. The evolution of South African criminology, and its gradual adoption of a more southern or decolonial sensibility, is traced in the work of the author and others.

KEY WORDS: southern criminology, decolonial criminology, autoethnography, South Africa

INTRODUCTION

It has become commonplace to say that colonization had a profound effect on both colonizer and colonized. If this is true, it is incumbent on the colonizer to confront the process of colonization, and acknowledge its continuing effects. This is precisely what Kuan-Hsing Chen called on intellectuals from former colonial countries to do when he said they ought to re-examine 'their own imperialist histories and the harmful impacts those histories have had on the world' (quoted in Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2015: 485). In other words, '[The colonizer] … must strive to achieve a degree of self-reflection, which illuminates the negative impact of colonization and how she has gained from it' (Chawla and Atay 2018: 5–6). This article is an attempt to excavate my history and reflect on how I have benefitted from my privileged position in the global order of knowledge.

The raw materials come from three sources. My starting point is my own, necessarily imperfect (Ellis and Bochner 2000) and selective (Chang 2008), memories of what I have thought about crime, crime control and criminology in South Africa over the last 20 or so years. The

work I published on these subjects during that time provides a more easily verifiable record of those thoughts. Finally, I draw on the scholarship of others to give a sense of the cultural context in which I was working. I hope to achieve two things in writing what is a rather unusual autoethnography. My primary aim is to encourage other colonizers to reflect on their imperialist histories and what flows from them, and to think seriously about the benefits of taking a more expansive, southern or decolonial view of criminology. These benefits include the opening up of new ways of understanding crime and responses to it in the Global North as well as the South (Comaroff and Comaroff 2010; Currie 2017; Parmar *et al.* 2023). My secondary purpose is to add a new chapter to the story of South African criminology since the dying days of apartheid first told by Van Zyl Smit (1990; 1999), before being taken up by me (Dixon 2004a; 2004c; Carrington *et al.* 2019a).

The next section of the article locates my work in the broad tradition of autoethnographic reflexive writing, clarifies what I am trying to do in adopting this approach and marks out some of the pitfalls I am keen to avoid. This is followed by a section in which I reflect on my own heritage, the origins of my relationship with South Africa and how I became what can be described as a colonial criminologist. The main body of the article concentrates on how my thinking and writing has evolved over the last 20 years in three distinct but overlapping phases, and the degree to which that evolution reflects, and is reflected in, the sweep of South African criminology. What I understand to be distinctive about southern or decolonial perspectives in criminology, their antecedents, and my engagement with them, will emerge as this story unfolds. Looking back over the last two decades, my main conclusion is that criminologists steeped in the northern, Euro-American tradition need to be aware of the constricting colonial orthodoxies they have inherited, question the assumptions that underpin them and become more open to alternative ways of being, knowing and doing rooted in the societies of the Global South.

AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

Broken down into its constituent elements, autoethnography combines a narrative of the author's personal experiences ('auto') with artefacts, such as published work, that encourage reflections on those experiences through 'space, time and circumstance' in the context of 'cultural norms and expectations' (the 'ethno') (Ellis and Bochner 2000; Ellis *et al.* 2011; Adams *et al.* 2022: 3). The third element ('graphy') consists in taking the 'craft of representation' seriously by providing a compelling account of the interaction between the 'auto' and the 'ethno'. Authors like Ellis and her collaborators are associated with an evocative approach to autoethnography while Anderson (2006) advocates an analytic style of inquiry closer to the traditions of symbolic interactionism. Individual autoethnographies fall at different points on the three 'axes' of 'auto', 'ethno' and 'graphy', and on the evocative–analytic continuum (Ellis and Bochner 2000; Njungiri *et al.* 2010). In what follows, I try to balance the evocative with the analytic aiming for the middle of that continuum with features highlighted by both Ellis and Bochner (2000) and Anderson (2006). It is a reflexive ethnography in that it seeks to shed light on the culture of the amorphous, loosely connected social world of South African criminology in which I have been an active, if geographically detached, participant. The narrative is personal, and biographical, in that I reflect on my family history, my positionality and the thoughts I had and the assumptions I made over the period of my engagement with South Africa. I also enter into a dialogue with other scholars in an effort to address a wider analytic agenda adding the 'ethno' to the 'auto' by using published work as data. I make myself visible in the text in the hope of engaging the reader's feelings as evocative autoethnographers wish to do, but try to avoid the self-absorption and 'author-saturation' (Anderson 2006: 385, quoting Clifford Geertz) that their analytic counterparts deplore.

Autoethnography in criminology

Criminology is not as rich in autoethnographies as other social sciences. The sub-field of prison research is an exception (Phillips and Earle 2010; Jewkes 2011; Micklethwaite and Earle 2021). Yet, even there, Sparks (2002: 558) was reluctant to spend too much time on the unintended consequences of his role as a researcher studying the unique prison regime offered in Scotland's Barlinnie Special Unit on the grounds that 'self-absorption' is 'ethically dubious', of 'peripheral relevance' and 'a failure of good taste'. Beyond the prison walls, Wakeman's (2014: 717–8) 'lyrical' criminological account of people who use and deal in heroin and crack cocaine is much cited and Ferrell (2012) has contributed a thought-provoking chapter on autoethnography to a comprehensive collection on research methods in criminology. Criminological autoethnographies that make use of published work are particularly thin on the ground: Barak (2020) cites Radzinowicz's (1999) *Adventures in Criminology*, as the only comparable work to his own. I make no claims to the eminence of either Barak or Radzinowicz. But I agree with the former that autoethnography, whether evocative, analytic or somewhere in between, can be a respectable means of making the connection between biography and history, the individual and social structure. If readers treat the autoethnographer as a 'prototype' rather than a person of criminological interest (Barak 2020: 5), it can fire the sociological (Wright Mills 1959) and criminological (Young 2011) imagination.

BIOGRAPHY

I have no idea where it came from, or how I came to inherit it, but I have a typescript copy of a memoir written by my maternal grandfather's elder brother. In it, he reflects on a long and distinguished military career that began in what was known by the British as the Second Boer War (1899–902). Reading his recollections of his childhood, I was intrigued by a reference to his maternal grandfather (my great-great-grandfather), one John Brown, a Liverpool merchant who had been sent to Jamaica in his youth to 'learn the business connected with the sugar industry'. What the memoirist does not mention—possibly because he was unaware of it—is that Brown's aristocratic mother 'owned a group of enslaved people who worked on the Carlton Estate in St James, Jamaica'.[1] On the formal abolition of slavery, her brother, Brown's uncle, received compensation of over £3,316 (the equivalent of just short of £500,000 today) for 164 people enslaved on the same estate.[2] As an infant, Brown himself seems to have been a counterclaimant for the more modest sum of £89 5s 5d in respect of three enslaved people in Falmouth in the parish of Trelawny.[3] I have no idea whether, still less exactly how, I benefitted from this bloody inheritance in a material way through my grandfather. But I was a beneficiary under his will and I find it impossible to believe that the status of his family as wealthy landowners in the southwest of Scotland, and successful Edinburgh lawyers, owed nothing to their ownership of estates in Jamaica worked by enslaved people, or the compensation received when those people were formally freed.

Unlike my grandfather, who also volunteered to serve Queen and Empire in South Africa but contracted typhoid and never saw action, my great uncle's memoir of his time fighting 'brother Boer' provides some fascinating insights into the mind of a colonial soldier. After joining the City of London Imperial Volunteers as a private, the memoirist spent most of the year 1900 in the modern day Free State. The Afrikaner (Boer) enemy are shown a grudging respect and

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1 Her ownership is recorded by University College London's Centre for the Study of the Legacies of British Slavery at https://www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs/person/view/2146644809.
2 See https://www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs/claim/view/19215.
3 See https://www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs/person/view/2146630599.

praised for their tenacity and scouting ability. He 'shares baccy [tobacco]' with one 'cheery' group but finds the son of a local Boer leader 'a most implacable young scoundrel', who confides that his people had 'always hated [the British] and always would'. When Boer combatants 'hands upped' at the last moment after a 'skirmish' south of Bloemfontein, the memoirist laconically records that others were less fortunate and 'got the bayonet'. A Jewish shopkeeper who attempted to profiteer was treated with similarly casual brutality: soldiers held him down while his shop was broken up and its contents carried off to provide them with a sumptuous dinner. Black South Africans are routinely referred to as k******,[4] 'cheerful, jovial fellows … rather thriftless, lazy … not too honest but … likeable and … grateful for any kindness'. Later, he makes a point of recording how a 'Basuto Chief' petitioned British forces to restore land taken from his people by the Boers since 'the British have always been the friend of the native and his champion against slavery'. Promoted to the rank of Second Lieutenant in 1901, and charged with guarding a bridge over the Caledon River, my great uncle has to report a farmer for harbouring armed insurgents. The man is arrested and sent to a 'guarded laager', prompting him to accuse 'pro-Boer agitators' of making out that such places are 'badly managed' and their inmates subject to 'brutal treatment'. 'This', he claims, is emphatically 'not the case': 'Britons may be rude and unsympathetic to aliens but I have never seen them cruel or unjust'.

The overall tenor of the memoir is of utter conviction in the justness of the war and complacency about its conduct on the part of the writer, his comrades in arms and the British colonial forces in general. The apparent execution of defeated adversaries and repeated accounts of looting and the wanton destruction of property, including that of the Jewish storekeeper, are passed over without critical comment or apparent scruple. The barbarism of the concentration camps in which Afrikaner resisters and Black 'undesirables' alike were confined is dismissed out of hand as incompatible with British decency though well enough documented both at the time and in subsequent historiography.[5] Boers are misguided and recalcitrant 'brothers'; black people treated with condescension as obvious racial inferiors, childishly gratified by displays of consideration but not to be trusted and in need of discipline. A product of his time and class, the imperial-colonial sensibility is clear to see throughout my great uncle's memoir of his time in South Africa.

My own introduction to living in South Africa in 1998 could hardly have been more different. I arrived as the son-in-law of an anti-apartheid activist and revolutionary socialist who had spent 27 years in exile, 10 of them in Britain. Acutely aware of my status as a white addition to a family categorized as 'Coloured' under apartheid's pernicious and nonsensical system of 'race' classification,[6] I spent my first few months feeling my way through this new landscape. I was ignorant of my great uncle's history in colonial South Africa at this point. But I knew that I was a scion of the former colonial power coming into a new family whose members had suffered (and in many cases resisted) the indignities and oppressions to which people not counted as white were subjected under colonialism and apartheid. With all of this in mind, I kept my head down, worked on finishing my long-neglected doctoral thesis on police governance in London, and kept a sharp eye out for what I imagined to be the unexploded political and cultural ordnance strewn in my way. In January 1999, I started work at the Institute of (now Centre for) Criminology at the University of Cape Town (UCT)

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4   'K*****' is a racial slur now widely acknowledged as unacceptable.
5   See Elkins (2022: 86–90) for more on this and on the camps in which approximately 30,000 people died, many of them children.
6   'Coloured' was one of the race classifications employed under apartheid that has survived its demise. This very diverse group made up 8.2 per cent of South Africa's population according to the most recent (2022) census, the majority of whom live in the Western Cape Province (https://www.gov.za/about-sa/south-africas-people#:~:text=For%202021%2C%20Statistics%20South%20Africa,%2C39%20million)%20is%20male).

and began the first stage of my engagement with crime, crime control and criminology in the still newly democratic South Africa. Less than 4 months after arriving in South Africa, I was hired on a temporary contract and entrusted with teaching a course on sentencing and punishment about which I knew next to nothing. The fact that I was offered the job, and felt able and qualified to accept, speaks to the cultural capital I brought with me as a male native English-speaking Oxford graduate schooled in the British tradition of critical criminology. The boundless confidence that went with those attributes made me convinced that I had something to offer to criminology in this outpost on the south-western tip of Africa.

CRITICAL COLONIALIST

Two years before I moved to South Africa, I had listened to a plenary presentation by the then Director of the Institute of Criminology, Dirk Van Zyl Smit, at the conference of the British Society of Criminology in Belfast. In this presentation (published as Van Zyl Smit 1999) he updated, an earlier analysis (1990) of the three major 'tendencies' in South African criminology. In it, he argued that the first of these currents, Afrikaner nationalism, had been a 'spent force' since the late 1980s when some of its remaining adherents had been reduced to fighting a rearguard action in defence of apartheid, most desperately in the form of 'military criminology' (Van Zyl Smit 1999: 199).[7] Ten years later, scholars reared in this tradition were still prominently placed in higher education institutions across South Africa offering purportedly value-free, technical solutions to criminal justice practitioners in the public and burgeoning private sectors. The second tradition, dubbed legal reformism by Van Zyl Smit, had sought to make the criminal justice system under apartheid work more efficiently and humanely and been reinvigorated with the formal repudiation of apartheid in 1990 and the institutionalization of constitutional democracy that followed 4 years later.

It was the third of Van Zyl Smit's traditions that gripped me as I listened to him in Belfast and read the paper that followed. Under the rubric of a criminology for a new democratic South Africa (CNDSA) with origins dating back to the apartheid era, it was informed by 'international radical and critical criminology' (Van Zyl Smit 1999: 200). Suspicious of legal gradualism and managerial reformism, it was committed to 'practical intervention'. In truth, there were at least three versions of CNDSA and its relationship with the critical criminologies circulating in the northern hemisphere, most notably in Britain. Writing the introduction to a volume of essays published in 1985, Davis had hitched the wagon of South African critical criminology very securely to Taylor *et al.* (1973) 'new criminology' and its subsequent realization in Hall *et al.*'s (1978) *Policing the Crisis* (Dixon 2004a). On his analysis, and much like mid-1970s Britain only more so, late-apartheid South Africa was lurching towards a law-and-order society in the face of an incipient crisis of control (Davis 1985: 11). A decade on and Hansson (1993; 1995: 43) acknowledged South African critical criminology's debt to this tradition but—reservations about its endemic 'androcentricity' notwithstanding—went on to claim that contemporary CNDSA took the 'counter-hegemonic' form of a 'progressive realism' modelled on British left realism. In the interim, Van Zyl Smit (1990) had pronounced himself less certain about the decisiveness of British influence preferring instead to see the main driver for the development of CNDSA in the tumultuous political events unfolding in South Africa as the hitherto unshakeable edifice of apartheid began to crumble. For him, it was primarily an endogenous phenomenon.

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7   See Van Zyl Smit (1989) for a fascinating account of the antecedents of Afrikaner nationalism and its contribution to the justification of apartheid.

Exclusive societies and criminology for a democratic South Africa

It was not until later that I read Hansson's work, so my own contribution to the colonization of South African critical criminology by its British cognate owed nothing to her advocacy for left/progressive realism. From what I recall, my lengthy article, 'Exclusive societies: towards a critical criminology of post-apartheid South Africa' (Dixon 2001) published in the journal of the South African Sociological Association was a product of two intersecting enthusiasms. The first was for what I saw as the renewed post-realist radicalism of Jock Young (1999) manifested in his book, *The Exclusive Society*. The second was for prosecuting the struggle against the growing hegemony of the apolitical administrative criminology on offer from the erstwhile Afrikaner nationalists, their successors and, as I was to remark in a subsequent piece, some of those formerly associated with the CNDSA (Dixon 2004a).[8] Rereading the article two decades on, I take some consolation from my awareness of the 'hazardous nature of any comparative enterprise', especially when a theory is 'European or North American in origin and the subject of study a non-western or southern society' (Dixon 2001: 214). Maureen Cain's (2000) warning about the perils of occidentalism and orientalism, the Scylla and Charybdis of such a project, were duly noted. But, with a sense of rightness of purpose not too dissimilar to that of my great uncle arriving in Cape Town to prosecute a just imperial war, I was ultimately convinced that the game was worth the candle. With few serious attempts to come to terms with the persistence of high levels of crime since the advent of democracy available, there was 'an urgent need for criminology to carry forward the honourable tradition of critical thinking on crime and social reactions to it established in the apartheid years' (Dixon 2001: 214). After taking the best part of seven pages, almost a third of the entire article, to retrace Jock Young's, and British critical criminology's, intellectual journey from the new criminology via left realism to *The Exclusive Society*, the extent of my debt to Young is obvious. From the radically exclusionary society of apartheid, South Africa had emerged blinking into the full glare of the neo-liberal global economy. Thus exposed, it had become, in Young's (1999: 81) terms, a 'bulimic society' in which crime occurred under conditions of 'cultural inclusion and structural exclusion'—the promise of 'a better life for all' made by the ruling African National Congress (ANC) at successive elections undermined by the unforgiving realities of an increasingly marketized post-apartheid society. In terms redolent of Merton's (1938: 679–80 and n17) view of the strictly limited, racially circumscribed, aspirations of African Americans in the 1930s, I argued that it was only with the coming of democracy that black South Africans had become subject to inclusion in the prevailing culture of materialism and able

> … to aspire to the standard of living taken for granted by their white compatriots [and] to dream that they too [could] live in a secluded suburban home with a swimming pool in the yard and a German sedan in the garage. (Dixon 2001: 216)

In keeping with Young's thinking (both realist and as expressed in *The Exclusive Society*), I argued that relative deprivation was key to understanding high crime rates. While the privilege of the few had become more visible to the many, those few were increasingly fearful of losing what they had in the ferment of South Africa's toddler democracy.[9]

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8   It is worth recalling, as I did in the published article (Dixon 2001: 209 and 212 n. 2), that Downes and Rock (1998: 301) had described left realism as 'little more than the name taken by administrative criminology when it appears in radical circles'. Muncie (1998) has also remarked that its reformism owed more to Merton than to Marx.

9   For the significance of relative deprivation in left realist thought see Young (1992).

Two books published around the same time provide useful points of comparison with my article. Shaw's (2002) *Crime and Policing in Post-Apartheid South Africa: Transforming under Fire* sets out to grapple with two key questions, the first of which I too had tried to answer, albeit in a more limited way. How, Shaw (2002: xi) asked, could South Africa, praised for its 'peaceful' transition to democracy, be suffering 'an aftermath of political violence?' His answer is remarkable for its eclecticism and the unsurprising emphasis given to the continuing effects of apartheid. He highlights the brutality with which it was administered, the social and economic inequalities it bequeathed and the widespread disrespect for rules, and their enforcers that it engendered. Most of the literature cited in support of his analysis was South African and my relish for the application of imported criminological theory is strikingly absent. Insofar as explanations for the extent and nature of criminal violence are offered, any connection with the northern, colonial, Euro-American canon is left unmade.

Contributions to the second book, a collection of essays on South Africa's 'crime wave', edited by Steinberg (2001a), take a similar approach. Apartheid, and its continuing effects on young people in the peri-urban townships established to keep the apartheid-defined 'races' insulated from each other, features prominently in his (Steinberg 2001b) introduction and in contributions by Altbeker (2001), Simpson (2001) and Segal *et al.* (2001). Steinberg (2002: 2) remarks on how South Africans' 'preoccupation with crime is testimony to how this country was stitched together with violence'. Though he does not say as much, this happened long before the implementation of apartheid policies following the National Party's rise to power in 1948. The violent stitching was accomplished by the British colonial power over many years of bloody conflict ending with the victory over the Boers in which my great uncle played a part, and the creation of the Union of South Africa in 1910. Altbeker (2001: 92) provides a short biography of the pseudonymous Sello Marafe (a 'gangster' whose funeral is the focus of his chapter) drawing attention to the forced relocation of his family from Sophiatown in central Johannesburg to Meadowlands in Soweto, an area on the periphery of the city 'renowned for its culture of gangs and gangsterism'. With a nod in the direction of control theory, he notes that unspecified criminologists 'in other parts of the world' have been as interested in why people do not offend as in why they do, and adds that the socializing processes that discourage crime 'as a model of life' are signally absent in Sello's social milieu (Altbeker 2001: 94). More or less explicit references to canonical criminological ideas appear in other chapters too. Segal *et al.*'s (2001) study of the township gangsters known as *amagents* touches on crime as learned behaviour, to violence as thrilling, joyful and 'seductive' (the work of Jack Katz (1988) is cited) and, in common with Altbeker, to the lack of effective social controls. Simpson (2001: 115) discusses relative deprivation but without reference to its salience in the thought of Jock Young and his fellow left realists. All three contributions are concerned with the rampant materialism of the *amagents*, and township youth generally. Luxury cars and designer clothes are critical to their sense of self-worth, and the pressure to achieve the lifestyle promoted in messages about the desirability of monetary wealth unrelenting. Yet these young people are at the wrong end of a very uneven distribution of the 'means or opportunities for achieving material success' (Segal *et al.* 2001: 97–8). From my, and Young's, perspective the unmade diagnosis of bulimia could scarcely be more obvious.

What emerges from my article, Shaw's (2002) book and the contributions to Steinberg's (2001) collection is a distinctively South African criminology struggling to make sense of high levels of violent crime. It is a CNDSA attentive to the country's still recent history of oppression under apartheid. The touch of the northern theoretical canon is light in the work of Shaw (2002) and Steinberg *et al.* (2001), appreciably heavier in my case. Determined to bring my learning from the Global North to bear on the problems of South Africa, I was following a similar path to the one trodden my great-uncle, eager foot soldiers both in the conquest of new territory, epistemological in my case, physical in his.

WIND OF CHANGE[10]

I have only a vague recollection of what spurred me to return to Cain's (2000: 87) warnings about the twin dangers of occidentalism and orientalism—the tendency to either ignore or romanticize the differences between 'us' and the 'other'—and her demonstration of the possibility of 'mutual and reciprocal learning'. It may well have been a sense that I had unfinished business there after my all-too-brief flirtation with her work in 'Exclusive Societies' (Dixon 2001). Whatever its source, a feeling that the traffic in ideas and practices was not all one way, and that there was more to the relationship between North and South, West and East, than the imposition of, and resistance to, hegemony, led me to write three articles about policy transfer, primarily in policing, published between 2004 and 2007.

Policy transfer and interactive globalization

The first paper, with the rather obscure title, 'Community Policing: Cherry Pie or *Melktert*?' proceeded from Brogden's (1999: 167) assessment that community policing is 'as American as cherry pie' (Dixon 2004*b*). Using the popular local dessert known in Afrikaans as *melktert* as its culinary analogue, it asked whether community policing had been adapted to local tastes following its adoption as the model for policing in the new democratic South Africa.[11] It was, I concluded, neither *melktert* nor cherry pie, but:

> [A] complex amalgam of more or less thoroughly indigenised 'Western' policies and traditional local (institutional and non-institutional) practices, interpreted and adapted to meet the economic, political and social needs of a society in the process of transition in the widest sense. (Dixon 2004*b*: 269)

This was followed by a more systematic search for evidence of occidentalism, orientalism and interactive globalization. 'In Search of Interactive Globalisation: Critical Criminology in South Africa's Transition' finds little evidence of orientalism but detects an 'incipient occidentalism' in CNDSA's 'looting of the conceptual toolbox' of British critical criminology by Davis (1985) (Dixon 2004*c*: 364). The possibility that a similar charge could be levelled either at Hansson (1993; 1995) for her promotion of 'progressive realism', or me for my cannibalization of Young in 'Exclusive Societies', does not seem to have occurred to me. This may have been because I judged the impact of imported critical criminology to be minimal as policy-relevant research was rapidly eclipsing 'theoretical deconstruction' (Hansson 1995: 55) with the growth of a 'new administrative criminology for a democratic South Africa' (Dixon 2004*c*: 373). For signs of a more interactive tendency in the global spread of criminological ideas I looked to the export of the so-called Zwelethemba model for the management of disputes to Northern Ireland as an important aspect of the work of Shearing and others on the networked nodal governance of security.[12] In the third article in the series, I attempted to trace the genealogy of community-based sector policing using a framework for analysing policy transfers suggested by Dolowicz and Marsh (1996; 2000). Apart from discovering that constructing a genealogy of a policy and practice as variegated as sector (let alone community) policing was no easy task, I found that the adoption of a 'global brand name' did not mean that goods sold under it elsewhere were retailed in South Africa without the addition of 'local content'. 'Ideologies, policy

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10   The reference is to the famous speech by the British Conservative Prime Minister, Harold Macmillan, to the South African Parliament in Cape Town on 3 February 1960.

11   I chose to use the Afrikaans '*melktert*' in preference to the English 'milk tart' to emphasize its South African-ness.

12   Froestad and Shearing (2012) provide the most comprehensive account of the model developed in the township of Zwelethemba outside Worcester in South Africa's Western Cape. See Johnston and Shearing (2003) and other writings by Shearing and colleagues on the nodal governance of security.

goals and programme elements have been transferred, no doubt; but there has been much innovation and adaptation too', I concluded (Dixon 2007: 178).

Published 4 and 9 years after the last of my articles, two pieces by Steinberg suggest a shared uneasiness about transferring ideas that travel with 'culturally specific baggage' (Steinberg 2011: 350 quoting Loader and Walker), and applying 'shiny concepts' outside their cultural and historical context (Steinberg 2016: 515). In his provocatively counter-intuitive analysis of democratic South Africa's adoption of crime prevention and community policing, Steinberg (2011) argues that, far from offering an alternative to the repressive practices that had gone before, they resonated only too well with apartheid thinking. Insofar as they assumed the ubiquity of danger in urban spaces, and the need for high-density paramilitary policing to counter it, they had the malign effects of encouraging the extension of police activity into areas better left to other civic institutions and distracting from the more critical functions of crime investigation and emergency response.

> Feeding upon old and powerful mentalities among South Africa's urban poor, the post-apartheid state, hungry for legitimacy, turned a range of urban problems into problems of crime, in order that they might be policed. (Steinberg 2011: 359)

His concerns in the second article are rather different. They consist of a plea for Garland's (2001) work on the culture of control to be used not as a source of 'shiny concepts' such as neoliberalism, responsibilization and governmentality that risk obscuring more than they reveal in societies outside the Anglo-American world but as an inspiration for the hard labour needed to carry out genealogical research. He illustrates his argument with the case of the *Amadlozi*, a vigilante group active in the Eastern Cape Province, typical of 'innumerable similar bodies' across South Africa whose existence, he suggests, is key to understanding the constitution of order and the distinctive culture and history of that society. Reading this, I could not avoid the uncomfortable feeling that I had been too keen to appropriate Young's 'shiny concepts' in 'Exclusive Societies' (Dixon 2001).

'Pointy Face' and aetiological crisis

After an hiatus of 5 years working on a project on racially motivated violence and harassment in the United Kingdom (Gadd and Dixon 2011), I turned my attention to South African criminology once more in what amounted to two versions of the same article. 'Understanding "Pointy Face": What is Criminology for?' (Dixon 2012) was aimed at a South African audience and appeared in a local open access journal read by practitioners as well as academic criminologists. A longer version, 'The Aetiological Crisis in South African Criminology' (Dixon 2013*a*), was written for an international readership in a publication accessible mainly to scholars with university-funded subscriptions.[13] Both refer to Antony Altbeker's (2007) account of being the victim of an armed robbery by an assailant with the distinctive physiognomy referred to in the title of the shorter piece. The notion of 'aetiological crisis' was taken from a familiar source of inspiration in Jock Young's (1986) criticism of mainstream Anglo-American criminology after the Second World War. My principal grievance was South African criminology's abiding concern with the social reaction to crime at the expense of its causes. I made a passing reference to Cunneen's (2011) call for a 'postcolonial perspective' in criminology as demanding that more attention be paid to the causes of criminal violence of the kind visited on Altbeker and his fellow victims of the inscrutable 'Pointy Face', but no more than that. Henkeman's (2013) response

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13   The need to adopt such a stratagem in order to make the piece about South Africa available to readers in that country is symptomatic of a wider problem with global inequalities in access to knowledge. See Connell *et al.* (2017) for a penetrating empirical contribution to debates on the post-colonial sociology of knowledge.

to my attempts to explain the apparent lack of interest in aetiology as, in part, a result of South African criminology's 'almost painful whiteness' (Dixon 2012: 8) confronted me with the error of my ways. Though grateful for my efforts in opening 'a frank dialogue between black margin and white centre', she took me to task for limiting my view of violent crime to post-apartheid society and ignoring the '*interaction* of trans-historic cultural, structural, psychological and physical violence generated during colonialism-apartheid-market democracy' (Henkeman 2013: 8 and 5, emphasis in original):

> [T]he act of delinking present manifest violence of historically oppressed people [like the robber 'Pointy Face'] from the different forms of violence perpetrated by historically privileged people (by erasing the past) exemplifies Stanley Cohen's argument about denial as 'the need to be innocent of a troubling recognition'. (Henkeman 2013: 7)

There was a need, Henkeman (2013: 6) argued, to move away from 'colonial thinking' towards an understanding of violence free of the 'artificial constraints of disciplinary, academic, temporal and political boundaries'. For her, the wind of change might have been blowing for the best part of 10 years but had not carried me nearly far enough. Though I felt rather aggrieved by her criticism at the time, on reflection, she had a point.

Massacre at Marikana

The end of this part of the story is marked by a series of papers written following the killing of 34 striking mineworkers at the Marikana platinum mine in South Africa's North West Province on 16 August 2012 (Dixon 2013*b*; 2015; 2019). Rereading one of them, 'A Violent Legacy: Policing Insurrection in South Africa from Sharpeville to Marikana', I seem to have absorbed some of the lessons administered by Henkeman without being conscious of having done so (Dixon 2015). I set the massacre in the historical context of structural and direct violence with its roots in the minerals and energy dependent political economy and regime maintenance practices of apartheid. There were parallels, I argued, between the shootings at Marikana in 2012 and the massacre at Sharpeville 52 years earlier under apartheid. Events at Marikana had to be seen in the context of the failure of successive governments to confront the structural violence inflicted on mineworkers and their families under apartheid and the long history of direct violence used by the police against those seen as posing a threat to the integrity of the state.

Ndlovu's (2013) analysis of the same events starts from rather different premises and is firmly rooted in the international literature on (de)coloniality. Quoting at length from Mignolo, Grosfuguel, Maldonado Torres and de Sousa Santos, Ndlovu (2013: 47–8) writes of coloniality as the 'darker side' of western modernity, 'longstanding patterns of power' that survive to define labour relations and the production of knowledge long after the end of 'juridical administrative colonialism'. In western 'abyssal thinking', the Marikana strikers existed on the 'other side' of a line between two realms, the metropolitan and the colonial, in the latter's 'zone of non-being' governed by appropriation/violence (Ndlovu 2013: 49 quoting Santos). Eighteen years into South Africa's democracy, the inequality associated with colonialism and apartheid remained intact, and as racially ordered as ever. Changes in the composition of the capitalist class wrought by programmes of Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) and the leadership of the South African Police Service whose members fired the bullets that killed the strikers, many of them in cold blood, could not disguise the continuation of colonial/apartheid structures, or the racialized identity of their (black) victims. The prominence given in media accounts to the strikers' use of 'traditional weapons' and *muti* provided by a *sangoma* to protect them from harm only served to reinforce the image of the strikers as primitive savages, naïve believers in 'black magic' beyond the pale (in both senses of the word) of northern/western civilization.[14]

A SOUTHERN/DECOLONIAL TURN

Ndlovu's (2013) explicitly decolonial framing of the Marikana massacre brings me to the conclusion to this narrative and a self-consciously southern or decolonial turn in my writing, and that of other contributors to South African criminology. Before I look at some evidence for this, I need to say something about where the southern and decolonial perspectives differ, and what they have in common. Southern criminology takes its cue from Connell's *Southern Theory* (2007) and is associated with authors based mainly, but not exclusively, in Australia. Its principal tenets have been set out in a series of publications (Carrington *et al.* 2016; 2018; 2019*a*; 2019*b*) and do not need repeating at length here. Suffice to say that southern criminology questions the pretensions to universalism of northern, colonial or mainstream theory without either rejecting what it has to offer, or idealizing ideas originating in the South. It foregrounds the impact of colonialism on colonized and colonizer alike, recognizes that both North and South are differentiated with characteristics of each present in the other, and takes the problems of the South, and the search for southern solutions to them, seriously. Above all, southern criminology is open to other, previously ignored or undervalued, ways of being and knowing.

Decolonial theory has been developed, among others, by the authors, mainly from Central and South America and the Caribbean, cited by Ndlovu (2013) and referred to earlier. In the context of criminology it has a good deal in common with the perspective adopted by Carrington and her colleagues. Some of the criticisms levelled at southern criminology suggest that its proponents either do not mean what they say—for example, about not rejecting northern theories or romanticizing southern ideas, institutions and practices—or fail to practice what they preach (Moosavi 2019; Ciocchini and Greener 2021). Others, made from a self-consciously decolonial vantage point, are more fundamental and deny the possibility of disentangling criminology from its western, modernist origins as a technique for the coercive control of subaltern populations (Blagg and Anthony 2019; Dimou 2021; Moore 2023). For these critics, the connection between criminology and the colonial project must be broken to create the space for alternative ontologies and epistemologies to gain the attention they deserve. The pluriverse can only come into being if the pretended universals of western modernity are not just questioned or decentred, as southern criminologists would have it, but overthrown. For the most sceptical, southern criminology is an 'innocence project', 'a defensive reflex', designed to 'exonerate Anglo-spheric theory from complicity in epistemic violence' offering no more than 'a few exotic embellishments' to 'the same old stock theories and methods' (Blagg and Anthony 2019: 6). As a result, it underplays the continuing significance of the colonial conception of 'race', and the hierarchical relationships between rational, civilized western man and the emotional, savage 'other' (Dimou 2021), not least when it comes to the treatment of indigenous peoples in the Global South, their lives and knowledge (Blagg and Anthony 2019).

My first exposure to these ideas came when I read Carrington *et al.*'s (2016) paper on 'Southern Criminology' in the *British Journal of Criminology*. Later, I accepted an invitation from Kerry Carrington to write something on South African criminology for inclusion in an article on 'Criminologies of the Global South' alongside contributions on Asia, Argentina, Brazil and Colombia (Carrington *et al.* 2019*a*). In my contribution to the published article, I argued that Van Zyl Smit's (1990; 1999) three tendencies in South African criminology had lost their distinct identities. Any remaining fault lines owed as much to institutional history as to differences over epistemology. Although disagreements remained about the need for 'objectivity' and the place of 'values' in criminological research, I detected broad agreement about the need to break the spell of 'Euro-American mentality' (Shearing and Marks 2011: 139), to rely less heavily on

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14   *Muti* can be loosely translated as traditional medicine, but in this context implies a substance with magical powers. A *sangoma* is a traditional healer.

'imported ideas' and to 'africanise' criminological theory (Bezuidenhout and Little 2011: 45). As evidence of South African criminology making room for excluded knowledge and confronting its blind spots, I pointed to the work of Henkeman (2013) and Steinberg (2016). I saw similar signs of a willingness to doubt the application of imported theories in Barolsky's (2016) critical appraisal of social cohesion and collective efficacy as a theoretical basis for a programme of urban upgrading aimed at reducing levels of violent crime in the multiply deprived township of Khayelitsha near Cape Town.[15] The only paper I cited that specifically referred to southern criminology was a study by Meth and Buthelezi (2017) of the effects of moving residents of a shack settlement into formal housing. They use southern criminology to illuminate the concatenation of high crime rates, unstable governance, extreme vulnerability and historic racial discrimination experienced by the people relocated to give added theoretical heft to the doubts expressed by Kruger and Landman (2008) about the local relevance of the findings of studies in environmental criminology conducted in the Global North.

Some work on South Africa has also appeared showing the influence of the international literature on (de)coloniality. Dastile and Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2020), for example, use incidents from the life of the country's first democratically elected President, Nelson Mandela, to illustrate how the daily lives of black South Africans, and their resistance to apartheid, were criminalized. They argue that this mobilization of the criminal law is consistent with its use in the 'pacification of barbarous tribes' as the British expanded their rule in the 19th century and raises questions about how crime was defined, and who was identified as a criminal, under colonialism and apartheid (Dastile and Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2020: 8). In another jointly authored article, Dastile examines the contemporary incarceration of women in South Africa in the context of colonial racism and the prison as an imported institution of control (Dastile and Agozino 2019). Boonzaier (2017) takes Lugones's (2010) 'decolonial feminism' as the basis for her analysis of media coverage of the rape and murder of a young woman, Anene Booysen, in the agricultural centre of Bredasdorp in the Western Cape Province south-east of Cape Town. The town and its inhabitants, most of whom self-identify as 'coloured', are presented as historically decontextualized 'others', the perpetrators as stereotypically angry, emasculated, barbaric black males and Anene Booysen herself as an (equally to type) inebriated, less-than-ideal victim, her humanity reduced to an intimate account of her injuries. In this way, Boonzaier (2017: 478–9) concludes:

> [The] media discourse works to produce knowledge that resonates with colonial ideology justifying domination and the continued subordination of the previously colonised and their descendants.

CONCLUSION

Spurred on by the need for scholars from colonial countries to confront the impact of their own histories, I set out to reflect on the evolution of my thinking as a colonial criminologist writing about post-apartheid South Africa. I hope that documenting how my perspective has changed over the last 20 years may encourage others schooled in northern or colonial ways of thinking, wherever they may be physically located, to undertake a similar re-evaluation of their approach to doing criminology and become more open to the ideas and social realities of the Global South. Because of its insistence on putting the investigator (and writer) at the centre of

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15 I have taken Barolsky's (2016) argument further in an article in press at the time of writing which I suggest that the use of northern theories of social cohesion and collective efficacy in preference to the locally grounded philosophy and ethics of *ubuntu* amounts to a continuation of the epistemicides committed under colonialism (Dixon 2024).

the research enterprise, autoethnography was the obvious methodology to adopt in coming to terms with my status as a colonial criminologist. The evocative elements in this autoethnography enabled me to examine my family's colonial history and think about how, trailing that history behind me, I was privileged by it and took advantage of that privilege without always recognizing how it conditioned my view of the unfamiliar social world in which I found myself. In a more analytic vein, I positioned myself and my work in the intellectual and cultural milieu of South African criminology by considering how other writers saw the problems with which I was grappling. Thus, the personal and the biographical were stitched into a broader cloth, my ethereal imaginings and recollections connected to the material reality of published work.

In the process, I also sought to shed some light on the development of South African criminology. What emerges from my memories and reflections on my own and others' work is evidence of a hesitant, discontinuous and still far from complete movement away from the constraints of northern thinking towards the adoption of a southern or decolonial perspective. There is a clear shift from my attempt to make sense of turn of the millennium South Africa in terms of bulimia and relative deprivation and other, theoretically eclectic, efforts to explain the persistence of high crime rates and the violent disillusionment of urban youth to more recent work on the built environment, women's imprisonment and representations of sexual violence. This transformation has been brought about by a growing sense that concepts developed in the Global North may have limited purchase in the peculiar circumstances of contemporary South Africa, informed over the last decade or so by the critiques of their sources, associations and application offered by southern and decolonial thinkers.

For me—and perhaps for others accustomed to treating the stock theories of northern (or western) criminology as universal truths—there are three important lessons to be learnt from this. The first takes me back to methodology and, whether we choose to write autoethnographically or not, the urgent need for colonial criminologists like me to reflect on our personal histories and our place in the epistemic firmament before we attempt to unravel the mysteries of crime and justice in the Global South. An absence of reflection, and scholarship informed by it, can only lead to flawed results and the persistence of skewed global hierarchies of knowledge. The second is that, instead of starting with the established canon and relying on it to understand crime and its control in the Global South, we need to begin with the empirical realities of the society under study before looking much more widely for ideas that illuminate them, starting with those that are rooted in that society, its history and culture. Replacing one pretended (northern) universalism with another, whether it is southern or decolonial, will not do. As Aas (2012: 11) has argued, criminology needs to press the 'zoom down' button if it is to attune itself to 'local conditions, concrete relationships and historic contingencies'. It follows—and this is the third lesson—that 'zooming down' on South Africa (or any other society for that matter) and its problems is more important than resolving disputes about the relative merits of southern and decolonial perspectives in criminology. In the South African context, both serve as necessary and constant reminders of the need to see beyond fixed and supposedly universal notions of scientific objectivity that have survived the slaying of the dragon of Afrikaner nationalism 30 and more years ago. Deplorable though its origins in the race-thinking of mid-20th century Europe may be, criminology in South Africa is so closely woven into the institutional fabric of higher education that it is very unlikely to be abandoned as abolitionists may hope. Its history and continued salience is part of the uniqueness of that society and cannot be wished away. Projected onto a wider canvas, I and other colonial criminologists must learn to subject our presuppositions to rigorous critical scrutiny, to question the familiar epistemologies to which we may default by virtue of our education and life experience, and to take careful note of the distinctive colonial histories and current situation of the societies we study and allow for ways of being in the world as unfamiliar to us as ours are to them.

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