

It's Not a Black Thing

Karim Murji questions the category of 'black on black' crime.

In February 2002 Andrew Aston, a crack cocaine addict, was convicted of murdering two elderly war heroes. From looking at the picture of Aston published in newspapers I wonder whether this should be called a white on white crime? This is of course not the conventional framing for issues about drugs, violence and 'race' - and despite the problems with this word, some of which I will be discussing here, I will not continue to put it in quotes, partly because many of the words in this piece should then also appear in quote marks. Guns, gangs, turf wars, clubland and bystander shootings have become a familiar, even banal, staple of media 'infotainment', of crime fiction and of popular culture, some of which, most recently in the form of the music group So Solid Crew, have been accused of glamorising these links.

A relatively recent variant of the well-established association between race and drugs is the yardie. Various texts on the yardies - in which I include all the sources listed above - make up a repetitive and closed circle. For example, one recurring motif is about their 'uniquely violent' nature. Hyper-masculinity, sexual promiscuity and conspicuous consumption in the form of fast cars and flashy jewellery demarcate yardies as 'other': racialised (as

Although crime reporters say that Trident has achieved 'major success', the mentality for ever more special operations persists, one police officer arguing that, 'if we had a proactive unit going after violent criminals you would see a major fall in armed drug dealing' (Davenport, 2000).

Trident is, however, different in at least two ways. First, it was set up to tackle gun crime and murders, which as the website (www.met.police.uk/trident) says, the "majority of which are perpetrated by black criminals on members of the black communities". This has become known as 'black on black' crime, though the police don't seem to use this term officially - perhaps, following their unique racial code, they call it IC3 on IC3 crime? As far as I have been able to establish, the BBC does not have an official line on whether the term 'black on black' crime should be used or not. But it has become commonplace in the media, in quote marks and in hyphenated and plain forms. The police are obviously not directly responsible for the language used in the media, though I suggest that their approach, along with others, is steeped in a particular way of thinking about race.

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a 'foreign invasion', or as invading or swamping particular areas), but also sexualised in ways that personify 'dangerous masculinities' as base and potent. Thus, yardies are 'over sexed' as well as 'over here'. While these representations undoubtedly reify race through physicality, the discourse stretches to infantilize yardies too. For instance, the *Daily Telegraph* (22 June 1993) quoted the head of a Metropolitan Police specialist unit on crack as saying that: "they [yardies] have a big thing about shiny, large calibre handguns in bright colours". Although race remains central to these constructions, it is noteworthy that there are multiple dimensions to the yardie identikit. Yet, when it comes to 'black on black' crime only race is deemed significant.

Yardies, drug trafficking and gun crime have prompted a number of special police operations since the 1980s. The latest of these is the Met's Operation Trident (there are similar operations in other British police forces). Put this way, Trident sounds like more of the same - another special unit to deal with drug-related crime and violence. In some ways it is: linking some or all of these has fuelled developments such as transnational policing and increased legal powers.

up over 90 per cent of the population of the UK it could be that this would be too general to serve any purpose, though such 'intra-racial' typing is used to identify patterns of homicide in the USA for example. If 'minority' crime is to be designated by racial/ethnic markers logic would dictate that we should also have Asian on Asian crime. Or, if we adopt the categories used in the 2001 census (and the government does want public agencies to use them), why not Chinese on Chinese crime, or Irish on Irish crime? If this sounds absurd why is black on black crime any less absurd? Even the problematic categories of the census recognise that 'black' is divisible into African, Caribbean, black British and 'mixed' (race) - but none of these distinctions are recognised in black on black crime. My argument though is not a call for more refined and careful use of categories - 'mixed on mixed' would be no less objectionable.

All these categories rest on a flawed premise: that race is a meaningful way of grouping humankind. Visible (skin, for instance) and bodily (blood and bone) qualities are summoned in essentialising race both biologically and culturally - they serve to fix heterogeneous groups into some imaginary common

type. The invocation of community embodies this view in relation to gun crime and drugs - and this is the second significant difference about Trident. It is presented as a police response to 'community' pressure. The head of Trident, DAC Michael Fuller, says that it is "an initiative set up by the police in response to requests from the black community over concerns about gun crime" (see Watson, 2001).

Who speaks for or represents 'the community' is problematic not just in relation to black and minority communities. The wider problem is that the idea of 'the black community' shares - with racial categories and the descriptor 'black on black' crime - the assumption that there is an essence that constitutes blackness and provides a basis for some common state of consciousness and identification. While Trident appears not to use the term 'black on black' crime officially, it does operate on the basis of an appeal to community. For instance, "local community groups play an integral role in Operation Trident", or "community support was identified at an early stage as being vital" (see www.met.police.uk/trident). The idea that criminals come from 'outside' the boundaries of community is a familiar one.

An appeal to the black community flattens all elements of diversity and difference. Class, gender and power seem not to cross the boundaries of seemingly fixed racial identities. This thinking is also evident in Trident's Independent Advisory Group - based on a similar body that the Met formed after the Macpherson report into the murder of Stephen Lawrence. Its chairman is Lee Jasper, who is also the race adviser to the Mayor of London. He says that the IAG's role in Trident is to develop 'a whole range of policing strategies that were more attuned to the sensitivities of the community' (Watson, 2001). The nature and consequences of those sensitivities and who can represent them is open to debate just as much as Jasper's view that "black neighbourhoods have become free trade zones for every kind

of drug and illegal contraband, including guns", and that a moral vacuum leads black men into crime (Jasper, 2002).

None of what I have said here means that violent crime involving guns is not serious or that it does not involve some black people. My argument is that the construction of black on black crime is deceitful. It draws on an idea of a bounded racial grouping that is shared by the police and 'community representatives'. In this sense the construction of black on black crime is ideological in a rather old-fashioned sense: it draws attention to some things while obscuring others, it mobilises law enforcement, and it provides the basis for moral enterprise. And it makes race meaningful as a supposedly obvious and natural way of comprehending social (dis)order.

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