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Immigration detention and the racialized governance of illegality in the United Kingdom

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ABSTRACT: This article examines immigration detention as a racialized practice of governing illegality in the United Kingdom (UK). It aims to respond to the call of scholars such as Bowling (2013), Parmar (2016), and Garner (2015) for criminology to explicitly engage with the racialized nature of contemporary practices of border control. In so doing, it represents an attempt to directly address the most salient observation from my multi-sited ethnography of immigration detention in the UK: that detention is a racist practice. The article considers the value of ethnography for understanding and conceptualizing race and racism “on the ground” in this unique carceral context, arguing that to make sense of immigration detention and the governance of il/legality, it is necessary to bring issues of race and racism to the fore. Doing so enables us to better challenge and denaturalize detention as a logical governmental response to mass migration and concerns about (national) security.

KEY WORDS: immigration detention, ethnography, United Kingdom, race, racialization, illegality

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Introduction

Race today is supposed to be a thing of the past. And yet all we do, seemingly, is to talk about it. We talk (about) race when not talking (about) it; and we don't talk (about) it when (we should be) talking (about) it. (Goldberg 2015a, 1)

This article examines immigration detention as a racialized practice of governing illegality in the United Kingdom (UK). It aims to respond to the call of scholars such as Bowling (2013), Parmar (2016), and Garner (2015) for criminology to explicitly engage with the racialized nature of contemporary practices of border control. In so doing, it represents an attempt to directly address the most salient observation from my multi-sited ethnography of immigration detention in the UK: that detention is a racist practice. This is not a novel observation, but rather one that many scholars, activists, and racialized migrants themselves have long known and/or experienced directly. Following scholars such as Hernández (2012), Loyd (2015), Longazel et al. (2016), and Bhui (2016), the article aims to engage directly with the racist nature of immigration detention and to position race and racialization as key to understanding this particular exercise of state power.¹ It also considers the value of ethnography for understanding and conceptualizing race and racism “on the ground” in this unique carceral context. Indeed, as Bhui (2016, 269) argues, “it is not possible to fully understand the dynamics of immigration detention without also understanding debates about race, ethnicity and racism within and across national boundaries.” That the UK's nine immigration removal centres (IRCs) primarily incarcerate racialized people further underscores the salience of race for making sense of the logics of confinement and how illegality is governed. The dehumanization of racism works to produce certain peoples as inherently detainable and deportable.

¹ Here, “race” is conceptualized not as an essential or inherent trait of a person, but as “the socially constructed contingent outcome of processes and practices of exclusion” and inclusion (Fox et al. 2012, 681).

However, as Goldberg (2015a, 1) makes clear in the above excerpt, our contemporary moment is characterized by the logic of postraciality, one in which race and racism are assumed to be “a thing of the past.” Everyday, institutional, and structural racisms persist yet the discursive terrain of postracialism seemingly limits what can be identified as racism. As Lentin (2016, 36) explains, “[r]acism is most commonly explained in terms of its manifestation as a behaviour, action, or attitude rather than as the expression of systemised racial logics with complex and multi-routed underpinnings.” The logic of postraciality narrows understandings of what racism is, and identifications of racism are met with denials (Goldberg 2015a; Lentin 2016). Indeed, Earle and Phillips (2015, 230) observe that “despite recognition of the urgent need to address widespread racism in British society, its complex, shifting dynamics and locally specific manifestations can be challenging to conventional empirical inquiry.” This article represents an attempt to think through ethnography as a method of unpacking institutional and structural forms of racism in the context of British immigration detention.

In this article, I consider “illegality” in a productive sense, following De Genova (2002, 423), which arises from, and is sustained by, the state and its security logics and immigration policies, as well as “the broader politics of nationalism, nativism, and citizenship.” Various categories of people are made “illegal” and subject to criminalization as “non-citizens or failing citizens” (Tyler 2010, 65). The neoliberal British government is actively producing illegality through its explicit policy of generating a “hostile environment” (Jones et al. 2015; Yeo 2017) for “unwanted” migrants by making their lives increasingly difficult, circuitous, and precarious, particularly for those who are poor and racialized. Presumably, with growing restrictions and prohibitions (including criminal offences) on their ability to work, rent, bank, or obtain a driver’s license in the UK (see Aliverti 2015), the “illegalized” will be “persuaded” to self-deport (Inda and Dowling 2013, 23). If not, immigration detention exists at the harsher end of the border control continuum to help solve the “problem” of migrants that the British state wants to expel.

Producing racialized illegality: The UK context

The “on the ground” reality of the British state’s response to unwanted racialized others must be situated within a broader “global hierarchy of mobility” (Bauman 1998, 151) in which the vast majority of the world’s population does not have access to regularized routes for migration. In addition to a plethora of border control efforts—interdiction at sea, pre-entry screening, the strict granting of visas, etc.—that make it increasingly difficult, if not impossible, for regularized migration for most human beings, western states are increasingly called upon to deal with those deemed “unwanted” who make it into, or already exist within, territorial borders. Indeed, as Bowling (2013, 302) argues, the growing “nexus between immigration and criminal law enforcement has the effect of immobilizing [non-white] people in the ‘global South’ and entrenching their position among the over-policed and over-imprisoned in the ‘global North.’” Processes of illegalization are met with logics of confinement, producing a seemingly ever-growing population of poor and racialized peoples incarcerated in both penal and immigration systems of wealthy nation-states.

Within this broader context, the issue of immigration detention—also termed “immigration imprisonment” (Simon 1998; Longazel et al. 2016)—has garnered increased academic attention in recent years as the phenomenon itself has grown rapidly around the world (Welch 1996; Simon 1998; Welch and Schuster 2005; Leerkes and Broeders 2010). The extant literature has drawn attention to the difficulties associated with indefinite detention as a lived experience (e.g., Griffiths 2013;

Bosworth 2014; Longazel et al. 2016; Turnbull 2016a), issues of privatization and the emerging “immigration industrial complex” (e.g., Bacon 2005; Ackerman and Furman 2013; Doty and Wheatley 2013), concerns about the effects of detention on mental health (e.g., Robjant et al. 2009; Steel et al. 2011), and questions of resistance (e.g., Puggioni 2014; Parr 2005; Colombo 2013; McGregor 2011; Sutton and Vigneswaran 2011; Fiske 2016).² Several scholars have explicitly drawn attention to the racialized nature of detention, linking this particular policy and practice to states’ racial projects and processes of racialized social control (Hernández 2012; Bosworth and Kellezi 2015; Loyd 2015; Longazel et al. 2016; Bhui 2016).

There is also a strong body of scholarship underscoring the necessity to locate contemporary practices of border control like immigration detention and expulsion within broader histories of nation-building and exclusion (Provine and Doty 2011; Sharma 2015; Weber and Bowling 2004, 2008) and as linked to parallel state practices of crime control and punishment that disproportionately impact racialized peoples (Loyd 2015; Longazel et al. 2016; Angel-Ajani 2003; Wacquant 2008). As Wacquant (2008, 49) argues, “the deployment of the penal apparatus to deal with immigration enables Europe to shun its deep-seated entanglement in the fate of the postcolonial societies of its former empire.” It also permits Europe to sidestep the varied “forms of social and state ostracization that continue to derail the path of non-European migrants in national life even as they gain legal status” (Wacquant 2008, 49). Yet, unlike in times past, migration policy is not explicitly racialized or gendered; rather, these social categories are evoked and “exercised without having to be explicitly stated” (Goldberg 2015b, 121). Racism works implicitly in and through migration policy and institutional structures and practices that include “on the basis of shared whiteness” and exclude those racialized as non-white (Fox et al. 2012, 681).

Present-day British immigration detention stems from Britain’s colonial project and its racialized post-World War II immigration policies that targeted non-white former colonial subjects for strict control and/or exclusion from the nation (Bowling and Phillips 2002; Weber and Bowling 2004, 2008; Paul 1997; Fomina 2010; Bhui 2016; Bosworth 2014; Tyler 2010). More specifically, during the 1960s, as Weber and Bowling (2008, 365) observe, “the development of what amounted to a ‘white Britain policy’ was indicated by the introduction of the Commonwealth Immigration Act 1962, which severely limited migration from the ‘New’ Commonwealth, while welcoming those from the mainly white Old Commonwealth.” In contrast to the explicit racism of past immigration policies, contemporary immigration policy and practice appears race-neutral, working instead through notions of “nationality” and “culture” (Sharma 2015). However, race remains the key technique through which human mobility is managed and through which “access to legal belonging, credential movement and travel, and the protection” of the state are distributed (Topinka 2015, 446).

The racialized character of British immigration detention can also be connected to the British state’s growing rejection of the European project—most recently articulated in the Brexit decision (see Virdee and McGeever 2017)—which increasingly manifests in the racializing and exclusion of Eastern Europeans. Garner (2007, 67) argues that the “[f]ear of the East—as a source of criminality, nomadic peoples, prostitution, and wage-cutting labor—has flickered in and out of political consciousness in the West” since the signing of the Schengen Accord. In the UK, Eastern Europeans are increasing subject to racialized hostility and discrimination (Fox et al. 2014). “There is,” according to Ghosh (2011,

² For a recent summary of the literature, see Turnbull (2017).

189), “an uneasy and unresolved relationship in Europe between the continuing economic need for migrant labor and the growing social dissatisfaction with their presence.” For Bhui (2016, 267, “while they conform to racialized understandings of what it means to be European, Eastern Europeans are also subject to a racialized framing as ‘other.’ Their whiteness is not seen as a motivation for inclusion, rather their cultural difference is seen as a criterion for exclusion.” The boundaries around and definitions of whiteness are thus variable, shifting at different times to include and exclude (Fox et al. 2012).

In this article, I examine the British state’s reliance on administrative confinement to fulfil the immigration related aim of removing noncitizens as a racialized strategy of governing illegality. I argue that the governance of illegality in contemporary UK society is racialized, gendered, and classed at both policy and practice levels, whilst being presented as neutral and disconnected from Britain’s colonial and imperial past and present. In order to make sense of immigration detention and the governance of il/legality, it is necessary to bring issues of race and racism to the fore. Doing so enables us to better challenge and denaturalize detention as a logical governmental response to mass migration and concerns about (national) security. Race is not “a thing of the past” (Goldberg 2015a, 1).

Data and methods

The article is informed by data from a multi-sited ethnography of four immigration removal centres (IRCs)³ in the UK between September 2013 and August 2014 and follow-up research with participants who had been released to the UK or deported to another country between January 2014 and December 2015. The study sought to explore the lived experiences of immigration detention and deportation in relation to the themes of identity, home, and belonging (see Bosworth and Turnbull 2015; Turnbull 2016a; Turnbull and Hasselberg 2017) through observational and interactive work and formal interviews with participants. Issues of race and racism emerged through the exploration of these themes, but were not the explicit focus of the research. I also did not initially plan to consider issues of systemic and institutional racism, but these issues have emerged as part of the analysis to “make sense” of contemporary British immigration detention as a policy and practice.

I spent a total of 149 days across the four IRCs and was fortunate to have a high degree of access to each IRC, including drawing keys and moving around without an escort, to observe and engage with detained individuals and staff members alike. I spent most of my time “hanging out” in areas of the IRCs where activities and “association” (i.e., mingling of detainees) took place, including the library, arts and crafts room, barbershop or salon, IT room, cultural kitchen, and communal seating on the wings or residential units. I observed various activities on offer at each IRC such as first aid workshops, information sessions given by representatives from NGOs and charities, sporting competitions, staff-detainee meetings, and bingo games.

Additionally, I conducted a total of semi-structured interviews (n=89) and focus groups (n=3) with male and female detainees⁴ across all four IRCs, with participants recruited through informal contacts

³ Three of the IRCs (Campsfield House, Colnbrook, and Dover) were entirely or primarily male institutions, whereas one (Yarl’s Wood) was primarily female.

⁴ I have chosen to use the term “detainee” to refer to the people who are detained. In so doing, I do not intend to naturalize this term or the policy and practice of detention, but rather draw attention to the “reality” of what is happening (i.e.,

made as part of the observation and engagement. I also undertook semi-structured interviews with some IRC staff members (primarily detention custody officers (DCOs)) (n=10) about their experiences of, and perspectives on, working in immigration detention. For the follow-up research, I interviewed a sample of former detainees (n=20) about their experiences of life after detention and/or deportation (see Turnbull 2018). The interviews and focus groups were transcribed and, along with the fieldnotes, entered into NVivo for inductive thematic analysis. All names of participants in this article are pseudonyms.

Although each IRC varied in terms of its “regime” and architectural and design features, all were secure institutions that confined a highly diverse mix of people: asylum seekers with rejected or pending claims, foreign-national ex-prisoners facing deportation, individuals accused of over-staying or otherwise violating the terms of their leave to enter or remain (including visas), and undocumented migrants. The detainee population was also heterogenous in terms of length of time spent in the UK and social factors like race, age, sexuality, ability, language, religion, and nationality. Inside each IRC, a plethora of languages and accents could be heard, and different styles of dress, religious practice, bodily comportment, and manners could be observed. Many detainees had long histories of both “legal” and “illegal” residence in, and ties to, the UK, including family members, spouses, and/or children there. Despite this heterogeneity, most detainees shared the common feature of being male, racialized, and poor.

Confining racialized others: Immigration detention in the UK

What is happening today in the field of immigration and asylum policing [and policy], we are constantly told, has nothing to do with racism. [...] *If this is not racism, what is?* (Fekete 2001, 39; emphasis in original)

Immigration detention is reflective of a “carceral migration policy” (Loyd 2015, 11) in which confinement constitutes the punitive end of the line for persons lacking the legal right to enter and/or remain in the UK. At present, the British detention estate consists of nine IRCs and two short-term holding facilities. These are closed, secure institutions that closely resemble prisons in terms of their carceral designs and security logics. The IRCs have a combined capacity to detain 3,566 individuals. In 2016, a total of 28,908 people entered detention, approximately 11% of whom are women (Home Office 2017). According to the most recent statistics at the time of writing, 2,738 people are in detention and an additional 484 individuals are held in prison under immigration powers (Home Office 2017). Although small compared to the United States, Britain has the largest immigration detention system in Europe.

In 2016, individuals from over 180 different countries of nationality were detained, although the bulk were from regions in Asia and Africa (Home Office 2017). Importantly, the nationalities of those detained reflect Britain’s colonial and imperial legacies, with India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Nigeria as the four most prevalent in 2016, constituting 35% of the detained population (Home Office 2017; see also Kaufman and Bosworth 2013; Bosworth and Turnbull 2015). Moreover, the majority of those in detention are nationals of the so-called “New Commonwealth,” which includes African and Asian (as well as Caribbean) countries that gained independence from Britain after World War II and yet are

detention) (see also Fiske 2016). This term is preferable to the term “resident” which some IRCs use to refer to those who are confined against their will through this particular form of state power.

mostly non-white and poorer when compared to countries of the “Old Commonwealth” (i.e., white settler states like Canada, Australia, and New Zealand) (see Fomina 2010, 64).

In recent years, however, as noted above, the number of EU nationals—particularly those from Eastern Europe—in immigration detention has increased, with Poland, Romania, and Lithuania constituting the three main EU countries of origin (Home Office 2017). The taken-for-granted character of immigration detention in Britain as primarily confining non-white individuals was evident in January 2017 when *The Independent* reported a five-fold rise in the number of European Union (EU) citizens detained in the UK between 2009 and 2015 (Forster 2017a). This finding led to an outcry amongst some Members of Parliament (Labour and Liberal Democrats) that the UK was callously detaining its “friends” (Forster 2017b)—although ostensibly just those racialized as white.⁵

Like European immigration policy more generally (see Garner 2007), the UK’s detention policy is supposedly race (as well as gender and class) neutral, as if any noncitizen is a “detainable subject” (De Genova 2016). Yet, in practice, immigration detention in the UK is a highly racialized, gendered, and classed state project of governing populations. On the harsher end of the immigration enforcement continuum, detention ensnares the “usual suspects” (Bowling 2013), namely those who are poor and racialized, reflecting the unequal access to regularized migration channels as well as the outcomes of racialized policing practices (Hernández 2012). This is very much the case in British immigration detention. It is, perhaps, expected that detention in the UK reflects a long history of racialization in which the British state enforces its immigration policy along racialized, gendered, and classed lines (Bowling and Phillips 2002; Weber and Bowling 2004; Fekete 2001). In the contemporary context in which many people are crossing borders but channels for regularized migration are strictly limited, immigration detention is a key mechanism for sorting the “illegal” from the “legal” (Martin 2012)—categories that are “racially coded and have racialized outcomes” (Bowling 2013, 302). Here, “racialization functions as a designation distributing bodies into differing circulatory channels” (Topinka 2016, 449), capturing and funnelling poor, racialized migrants into immigration detention while racially and economically privileged and “credentialed” migrants move through regularized routes (see also Garner 2007) and thus rarely, if ever, see the inside of one of Britain’s IRCs. As Hernández (2012, 355) argues, “[s]urveillance and holding brown and black bodies has become an acceptable method for dealing with the ‘problem’ of brown and black ‘criminality,’” which makes such a method more easily extended to immigration and border controls, of which immigration detention is part.⁶

In what follows, I draw on ethnographic data to unpack some of the ways in which immigration detention is a racialized strategy of governing illegality in the UK. Part of the aim here is to underscore the importance of race and racism to understanding immigration detention as a policy and practice that disproportionately targets racialized migrants in an institutional context of postraciality (Goldberg 2015a; Lentin 2016).

⁵ More recently, the European Commission has indicated it is examining the detention and deportation of EU citizens in the UK for possible breaches of their rights (Townsend 2017).

⁶ The links between racialized administrative detention and punitive (mass) incarceration are important but cannot be addressed here (see, for example, Loyd 2015; Longazel et al. 2016).

Studying “race” and immigration detention ethnographically: A note on method

As noted above, states’ abilities (and desires) to incapacitate are not evenly distributed between noncitizens within territorial borders. This was clear during my fieldwork across the four IRCs. One only needs to spend a few minutes inside a British IRC to have visual confirmation of the racialized (as well as classed and gendered) nature of detention. Yet, in terms of how IRCs are run, at two of the field sites (Campsfield House IRC and Dover IRC), the lack of racial “diversity” amongst staff was stark, with predominately white “keepers” and non-white “kept.” The other two field sites (Yarl’s Wood IRC and Colnbrook IRC) were more “diverse” and included staff racialized as non-white, some with migrant backgrounds themselves. My own positionality likewise placed me in the dominant category of whiteness, often causing confusion amongst detainees as to my role in the IRCs (e.g., as a Home Office employee, as a member of staff, as working for an NGO, etc.). The telling point, however, was that whiteness was associated with authority and an outsider status.

During my multi-sited ethnography, issues of race and racism were not the explicit focus of my research, but rather explored as part of the broader themes of identity, home, and belonging. Given the highly uncertain, unpredictable, and anxiety-provoking nature of detention, much of the fieldwork was occupied with the daily lived experience of confinement and the threat of deportation. Consequently, my fieldnotes tend to hint at the importance of race in detention, rather than offer sustained reflection or interrogation. Looking back, perhaps this is because of the pervasiveness of racialization—that is, that those detained were also exclusively people racialized as non-white, with the exception of racialized Eastern Europeans. I wonder now if the racist nature of detention became normalized, in the sense of becoming a simple “fact” about detention, as my research progressed, preventing at the time a deeper critical interrogation of the workings of race and racism in immigration detention at the time.

One example of the concurrent visibility/invisibility of race is present in my fieldnotes:

When the DCO [detention custody officer] comes to open the library, I go inside and sit down at the table. I chat a bit with the officer who’s busy organising the magazines and newspapers. As I wait for [“Antoine,” one of my informants], I notice that on-top of the bookshelf (the haphazard “display”) is Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks*. I get the book and read a bit while I wait, wondering if it’s interesting that this book is in detention? (Fieldnotes, Colnbrook IRC, 13 June 2014)

Clearly, I *did* think it was interesting that the detention centre library had a copy of Fanon’s book; otherwise, I would not have mentioned it in my fieldnotes. Yet, I did not elaborate further, nor did I provide additional observations about this in my fieldnotes when I later saw a black informant reading the book in the library. I recall feeling the incongruity of *Black Skin, White Masks* being located inside a racialized and racist institution; the existence of a book that powerfully critiques western civilization, whiteness, and the psychology of colonialism within an IRC that primarily confines racialized, postcolonial subjects seemed almost comically absurd. At the time, I credited it to the more general contradictory and ambivalent character of British immigration detention (see, for example, Bosworth 2014).

I observed numerous conversations about race and racism whilst undertaking my fieldwork, particularly as detainees tried to make sense of their situations. The following excerpt from my

fieldnotes describes one such conversation between a white English DCO and a small group of detainees of colour in the library:

A loud discussion ensues between [“Luiz,” a Brazilian detainee] and another young man, then [the DCO] gets involved in response to [Luiz]’s argument that British people are lazy and don’t do hard work, so it’s non-white foreigners who are doing all the hard jobs, like cleaning office buildings in London. There is some agreement and disagreement, with several men making claims or counterclaims, then [the DCO] gets mad at [Luiz], saying her parents worked really hard, that life isn’t easy just because of being British; she takes offence to [his] characterisation of British people as lazy. [Luiz] starts to argue back, to which [the DCO] tells him loudly and firmly “enough.” (Fieldnotes, Colnbrook IRC library, 9 May 2014)

In this exchange, Luiz tries to make an argument against what he perceives to be the racialized and hierarchical structure of the UK’s migrant labor market and the apparent unwillingness of (white) British citizens to perform, in his words, “hard work.” However, the white DCO shuts him and the discussion down, effectively denying his experience as a racialized migrant worker in the UK and asserting instead her own racialized experience. Another participant, Hussain (early twenties, Pakistan, detained at Campsfield House IRC), made the same argument as Luiz, underscoring the perceived unfairness of the system: “[Hussain] says he just wants to make a life for himself here. He says it’s unfair that there are a lot of white British people on the dole [welfare] who then blame foreigners for taking their jobs when these people are just being lazy” (fieldnotes, Campsfield House IRC, 8 October 2013). Luiz’s and Hussain’s comments underscore the contradictory character of British immigration detention in that they rightly highlight the racialized distribution of labor (i.e., that migrants do undesirable jobs that many citizens do not want to and will not do), yet it is non-white foreigners like them who are criminalized and made illegal by the British state’s border control policies.

Managing “diversity” in immigration detention

Having previously studied how penal institutions recognize and respond to offender differences (i.e., gender, racial, and cultural) (see, for example, Turnbull 2016b), I was interested in the framing of “diversity” in the context of carceral institutions focused primarily on the expulsion of racialized noncitizens. It was not especially surprising that, within each IRC I visited, the racialized character of immigration detention was largely managed through institutional discourses of “diversity.” In this context, discussions of “culture” and “nationality” dominated, erasing, for the most part, explicit reference to race or ethnicity (see also Bosworth and Kellezi 2015). The institutionalization of “diversity” in immigration detention, as in other neoliberal institutions (see Ahmed 2012), supplants more critical or sustained considerations of race and racism, including whiteness, as institutionally relevant categories, practices, and processes.

In each IRC, detainees were frequently called upon to “celebrate” and/or showcase their “diversity” through the various activities, such as arts and crafts, that were also designed to help keep them busy.⁷ For instance, while conducting fieldwork at Campsfield House IRC, I observed one of the art projects undertaken as part of the preparations for black history month. Detainees (particularly those with

⁷ Detention centre staff were tasked with keeping track of which detainees participated in the activities as part of the IRCs performance monitoring for contractual compliance.

African nationalities) were recruited to co-create a mural of Africa in the arts and crafts room, which was then to be displayed in the dining hall alongside information about famous black people for the IRC's "diversity week" so "that non-black detainees can learn about black history" (fieldnotes, Campsfield House IRC, 24 October 2013). However, the bringing together of the continent of Africa and black history month in the mural caused some confusion amongst detainees. As a "celebration" of diversity, not all "Africans" or "blacks" were included in this institutionally designed project.

[While in the arts and crafts room] I overhear one detainee ask [the art teacher] about the mural, says he's from Africa too (Egypt). I get the sense he's wondering how he can participate. [The art teacher] explains that it's for BHM [black history month]. He looks confused. [The art teacher] tries to explain again that some of the detainees have chosen Africa to represent BHM. There's a moment of awkwardness. (Fieldnotes, Campsfield House IRC, 10 October 2013)

Similar discussions and moments of puzzlement occurred between Caribbean and African detainees, with some of the former enquiring as to why the mural did not include representation from Caribbean countries and explicitly address slavery.

[One detainee] explains why the map of Africa is painted red, gold, green and what the colours mean. [Another detainee] asks what about slavery, but [the first man] says that sort of thing isn't included. [...] The discussion is interesting in terms of what Africa and blackness means to different detainees, as not all Africans are 'black' and not all 'blacks' are African and may not feel as connected to the continent. (Fieldnotes, Campsfield House IRC, 28 October 2013)

Such activities and conversations worked to highlight the complexities of diverse identities in immigration detention, particularly in the context of activities that aim to celebrate "diversity" yet avoid contending with the more complex and complicated entanglements that exist in manifestations of race, ethnicity, and racialized processes like colonialism and slavery. In such cases, there is little space for explicit consideration of the role of British Empire in these processes.

From the perspective of IRC management, activities that addressed issues of detainee "diversity" were part of the work of operating the facilities and ensuring contractual compliance. At Campsfield House IRC, for instance, I was invited to attend the meetings of the Diversity Management Group Committee, which, as its name suggests, focused on the task of "managing diversity."

This meeting felt a lot like a mix of some genuine care and interest with much concern around diversity management and meeting the reporting and contractual obligations. While one SMT [senior management team member] mentioned several times that this wasn't about "ticking the box," the opposite came across. In the context of an IRC, it seemed like managing diversity is a complicated mix of care with more utilitarian goals of ensuring institutional order and not having detainees make complaints about racism or inequality. Does it go without saying that the committee members are, with one exception, white? (Fieldnotes, Campsfield House IRC, 18 September 2013)

As the excerpt suggests, managing diversity at this IRC was a process of meeting several different goals, including avoiding claims of racism or discrimination by detainees. The focus on "feel good" celebrations of diversity in immigration detention were common, with the observation of various

religious and cultural holidays through arts and crafts and food. My first visit to Colnbrook IRC, for example, was during Chinese New Year and the arts and crafts room was adorned with various artistic works celebrating the year of the horse. My fieldwork at Colnbrook also coincided with Ramadhan, which the centre supported, “allowing [detainees] to break the fast in the sports hall, then giv[ing] them lunch box containers of food to eat after 9:23pm” (fieldnotes, Colnbrook IRC, 30 June 2014). Similar provisions were made at the other IRCs I visited during religious holidays like Eid and Diwali, with some IRCs procuring special foods including sweets as part of the celebration for detainees. While these sorts of activities and accommodations were appreciated by many detainees I spoke with, larger questions exist around the contradictions and complexities of “managing diversity” within the racialized spaces of immigration detention. That detainee “diversity” is “celebrated” in a context where their liberty is denied, and the British state is actively seeking to expel them in what can be understood as a rejection of this same “diversity,” speaks to the contradictory character of detention.

Where are the “white people”? Making sense of immigration detention

The racialized character of British immigration detention was not lost on many of the people I spoke with during my research. For some participants, the lived experience of immigration detention was one of racial inequality and discrimination. Detention was viewed a practice that was unequally applied to migrants on the basis of race. As Beata (mid-thirties, Namibia, deported from Yarl’s Wood IRC) observed, “[a]ll [of] these English concentration camps only consist of Asians, Africans, Arabs and other mixed-race people but no whites! Does this imply that white people cannot be illegal immigrants in the UK?” Here, Beata points directly to her experience of who is detained and her perception that immigration enforcement targets non-white foreigners. For her, race and racism explain what is happening in and through British immigration detention and in relation to how she was treated by the British state.

The idea that immigration detention was for people racialized as non-white was also raised in a conversation I had with a non-white DCO at Yarl’s Wood IRC who remarked about his experiences of working at another IRC. He explained how some Eastern European detainees would tell him that he should be in detention because he is black and they should be “out” because they are white. The DCO also explained that some of the black detainees have told him it is wrong to work in a place that locks up his own people, suggesting that they think this type of work is something that white people should do. However, he did not believe his race had anything to do with his job, which he viewed as simply caring for people (Fieldnotes, Yarl’s Wood IRC, 6 April 2014). Importantly, such perceptions highlight the racialized undertones of immigration detention and assumptions about who are or should be detainable subjects. These perceptions also underscore the ways in which institutional whiteness works to produce non-white staff as “out of place” and potential “race traitors.”

Other informants made similar observations to Beata while drawing attention to the legitimacy of the practice of detention. During a focus group at Dover IRC, one man (of Caribbean decent) commented:

One thing I know, this place is not a detention centre; it’s a discrimination centre. That’s what it is. A discrimination centre. When you single out a group of people or an individual for treatment and punishment, that’s the definition of discrimination. And when you look at the category of people who are in here, their ethnic origin, their background and their country of origin, you can see where we are being evicted and rendered, you understand. (Focus group, Dover IRC)

Like Beata, this informant highlighted the discriminatory nature of immigration detention and its unequal application to certain racial/ethnic groups and countries of origin. Although not as explicit as Beata, he similarly perceived the British immigration system as being unfairly directed at racialized people. He went on to say:

Discrimination. We are subjected to accept what is going on here, we are being bullied. Then you are harassing me when you take me away from my family. So where harassment is, where bullying, where discrimination lies, we are the subject of it. [...] Where we're being harassed, bullied and further discrimination. That's what it is. They're saying to us that "If you don't like it, go home." (Focus group, Dover IRC)

The informant further linked his perception of racial discrimination to his experiences of bullying and harassment by the British immigration system. He also articulated a lack of choice, suggesting that detainees were being forced to accept discriminatory treatment or, as the only alternative on offer, to "go home." Another focus group participant concurred, asking "[h]ow can a human being be this, this deprived of his basic human right, that is equally guaranteed to all without regard to race, colour, or nationality?" (Focus group, Dover IRC). For this man, being removed from his family and being deprived of his liberty contravened his right to equal treatment and protection against racial discrimination.

The unequal access to mobility was also highlighted by several participants who contrasted their experiences as people of colour in the UK and in immigration detention to the treatment of white people in their countries of origin. In such accounts, race was a central explanatory factor for differential and often unfair treatment. For instance, it was not uncommon for participants, especially those from Africa, to note how white visitors in their countries of origin are typically treated with respect and dignity, whereas in the UK, they (as people of colour) are subjected to disbelief, suspicion, and hostility. Being confined in a detention centre was, for some informants, evidence of racism and inequality, something that white people would not encounter in their countries of origin.

Other participants pointed to the implications of British empire and colonialism, noting how their migratory paths were shaped by these longstanding processes (see also, for example, Turnbull and Hasselberg 2017). Some specifically noted how earlier reforms to British immigration law effectively worked to transform them from citizens (of the British Empire) into migrants without rights (see Bhabra 2016). These informants drew important connections between their personal situations and identities and broader historical and contemporary practices of state-building and migration control. However, in immigration detention and within the immigration system more generally, there was little space for these contextualized analyses to be "heard."

Immigration detention, racism, and white supremacy

Racism, Armenta (2016, 83) notes, "is embedded in the political, economic, social, and legal structures of society." Although immigration detention policy and practice may not be explicitly or intentionally racist (nor gendered and classed), its workings and implications constitute one of the "racialized outcomes" (Bowling 2013, 302) of Britain's border control and migration policies. The racialized character of immigration detention works to reproduce racism and exclusionary policies by marking racialized others as unworthy of inclusion (Provine and Doty 2011) and in need of separation from the body politic through confinement (Fekete 2001). Indeed, as my informant Beata remarked, it seems

as if “white people cannot be illegal immigrants” in the UK as they are not subject to immigration detention like those racialized as non-white. Garner (2007, 70) explains that “the symbolic actions of the state are increasingly effective in that they promote an idea that certain bodies *en masse* pose particular threats to resources and public security.” At the same time, white supremacy is reinforced.

As Weber and Bowling (2008) remind us, it is also important to consider how the constitution of the racialized other that does not belong is simultaneously a (re)defining of “Britishness.” They argue that “the assertion of national identity contributes to the contemporary identification of suspect mobilities” (Weber and Bowling 2008, 365). Through state practices like immigration detention that seek to identify and expel largely racialized people, the British state (re)produces itself as a “white” nation vis-à-vis these racialized, out-of-place others (Martinot 2007, 28). Although, as Martinot (2007, 32) contends, “the peoples racialized differ over time, bearing different histories and locations, all exist as Other to the white nation.” The racialized production of Britishness and belonging feature prominently in the daily lived experiences of detention as detainees make claims and negotiate issues of identity, inclusion, and il/legality, as the conversation in the Colnbrook IRC library discussed above makes clear (see also Bosworth and Kellezi 2015; Bosworth and Turnbull 2015).

It is also necessary to contextualise immigration detention as part of the British state’s broader security apparatus in which border control, migration management, and criminal justice intersect. In this sense, to understand immigration detention as a racialized technique of governing illegality, it is likewise vital to recognize how racialized practices of policing increase the chances of certain populations coming into contact with the criminal justice and/or immigration systems. Indeed, as Garner (2007, 70) contends, various “internal controls [...] impact non-whites disproportionately, including nationals and/or people with long-term resident status.” The active production of a “hostile environment” further increases the likelihood that racialized migrants will be brought to the attention of immigration enforcement as the public is enlisted to help police the right to be in the UK (Aliverti 2015; Yeo 2017). Such practices help explain how British immigration detention is highly racialized, predominately capturing the “usual suspects” (Bowling 2013). Racism, Tyler (2017, 4) argues, “is not only an accessory of border control; rather, in a more fundamental and material sense, *racism makes borders.*”

This article raises additional questions about how ethnographic methods can be used to study immigration detention as a racialized practice of governing illegality. In the context of ethnographies in and of carceral spaces, as Phillips (2012) observes, researchers do not experience what we study: confinement. Our own positionalities also affect what and how we study, including exploring issues of race and racism. Making sense of my multi-sited ethnography of British immigration detention also means attending to “the structure of whiteness” (Martinot 2007, 23) in detention policy and practice. The above excerpts from my fieldnotes link to Goldberg’s (2015a) argument that race was both present and absent, visible and invisible, during my research across four British IRCs, pointing to the challenges of studying systemic and institutional racisms ethnographically in an institutional context that frowns at discrimination and “celebrates” diversity. Attending to issues of race and racism is a question of method, of making visible the connections to these issues in how illegality is both produced and governed. Despite the race (and gender) neutral façade, the neoliberal British immigration system and its processes, practices, and outcomes are racialized and racializing.

Conclusions

I concur with Armenta (2016, 92) that “it is critically important that we do not erase race from our analyses” (see also Parmar 2016; Garner 2015). This argument is especially important in the broader context of postraciality and the discursive narrowing of racism away from its systemic and institutional workings. Issues of race and racism are essential to understanding—and challenging—immigration detention in the UK (Bhui 2016). As De Genova (2002, 424) notes, “the inequalities generated by the law’s apparently uniform application among asymmetrically constituted migrations from distinct sending countries tend to be naturalized.” As has been demonstrated in this article, these inequalities are very much produced and reproduced through immigration policy and the illegalization of predominantly racialized peoples. For Garner (2007, 70), the “symbolism of national control and exclusion takes on a racialized dimension” when border controls like detention “disproportionately target” people of colour. The “diversity” rhetoric I observed within British IRCs does not address the inherent power relations and historical and contemporary factors that produce racialized outcomes.

It is important to attend to the different ways that immigration detention is racialized (as well as gendered and classed) depending on local formulations and specific histories. The legacies of British colonialism and imperialism have shaped the contemporary practice of detention and who ends up in one of the UK’s nine IRCs. To challenge immigration detention, and work to denaturalize it as an appropriate or logical state response to mass migration and concerns about security, it is necessary to attend to issues of race and racism. British immigration detention is a racist practice, one that is connected to broader racialized strategies of governance. It is hoped that this article contributes to critical engagement with issues of race and racism in how neoliberal states respond to concerns about il/legality, border control, and penal governance.

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