

Beyond ambivalence: Locating the whiteness of security

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Introduction

Critical security studies' increasing engagement with race and racism offers a welcome corrective to the subfield's longstanding tendency to ignore such concerns. Yet our intervention begins from the premise that simply adding race and racism to the list of topics and frames of critical security analysis is insufficient. This follows from the growing recognition that critical security studies' and international relations' disavowal and erasure of racism is not reducible to a lack of attention to race per se. It concerns the myriad ways in which international relations (Anievas et al., 2015; Henderson, 2013; Krishna, 2001; Muppidi, 2012; Rutazibwa, 2016; Tilley and Shilliam, 2017; Vitalis, 2015) and security studies (Howell and Richter-Montpetit, 2019, 2020) are implicated in civilizational thinking at the core of white supremacy. Building on these insights, our intervention is structured around the following question: If we take seriously that international relations and security studies are implicated in civilizational thinking, how might recognition of this amend our existing critical depositions to security as well as our analytical starting points for what security *is* and *does*?

Answering this question requires taking stock of how critical security studies' orientation to security squares with wider questions concerning power and structure in global politics. In developing non-traditional approaches to security, critical security studies has cultivated an important critical distance from state security and (neo)realist accounts of war-making as security. Guided by an imperative to decentre material relationships, however, critical security studies has embraced a commitment to open-ended and ambivalent accounts of power, which unmoor security from histories and structures (Barkawi, 2011). As a result, critical security studies broadly (and its post-structuralist variants in particular) 'fail[s] . . . to adequately situate security within complex entanglements with other technologies of power' (Coleman and Rosenow, 2016: 203). This tendency to abstract security from wider power configurations, we suggest, has largely precluded critical approaches to security from apprehending racism as a *structural* form of power in global

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politics that serves capital and colonial prerogatives – albeit with notable exceptions (e.g. Abu-Bakare, 2020; Ali, 2020; Axster et al., 2021; Eastwood, 2019; Manchanda and Rossdale, 2021). This poses a specific problem for any critical engagement of racism in relation to security: Racism only makes sense as a form of power and technology of governing insofar as it does specific kinds of work, namely, (re)producing differences and hierarchies in the service of capital and empire. To imply that ‘security’ can be bracketed off from and thereby detached from its imbrication in long histories of race-making, capitalism and empire (Jelly-Schapiro, 2018; Singh, 2017) is naïve, untenable and complicit in the (re)production of structural white supremacy.

As a corrective to these tendencies, we suggest that security needs to be apprehended as a concept, a set of power relations and governing regimes that are dynamic but do specific work for capital, colonization and, hence, race-making. To this end, we call for a closer engagement with three sets of literature. First, we argue that Marxist critiques of security and pacification theory can help locate security materially within ongoing histories of imperial, colonial and capitalist domination. Yet, while these theorizations of security crucially foreground material and ideological considerations, their core texts engage only tangentially with questions of race and racism. Thus, second, we suggest that critical security studies needs to engage with theoretical traditions that situate race and racism as foundational to capitalism and the maintenance of the colonial/modern world system (Quijano, 2000, 2007). We detail some key insights from these literatures, which illuminate the particular work security does for racial domination and violent dispossession. Third, and finally, in contrast to longstanding currents in critical security studies that locate security as a source of emancipation (Booth, 1991), we argue that security needs to be dismantled by engaging with abolitionist thought and praxis.

Drawing on these literatures, we begin to unpack the foundationally raced precepts of security and offer some suggestions for critical security research. We argue that race cannot be ‘tacked on’ as a qualifier but needs to be addressed as a structure that informs how we apprehend security in the first instance. In doing so, we locate security as a justification for violence and the legitimization of the mechanisms through which this violence is waged. We suggest that critical security studies needs to reckon more seriously with how security projects and the kinds of social orders they enact are *always already* racial orders too, predicated on the production of racialized ‘Others’ in need of elimination. The focus should be on interrogating how processes of racialization work in relation to security, along with the structures they depend on and the ends they serve. ‘Security’, we argue, is the term used both to *hide* racial violence and Native dispossession and annihilation and to legitimate this same violence. Drawing on terminology from literature on the imperial origins and raced foundations of police (Singh, 2014), we call on critical security studies to contend with what we call the *whiteness of security*. This can assist efforts to locate the particular roles that security plays in the normalization of group-differentiated violence (Gilmore, 2002) and the forms of value accrued therein. Locating the whiteness of security, however, does not imply that racial categories and their attending power structures, sites and objects of violence are stable and totalizing – quite the contrary. While we spell out some new analytical and political avenues, there is much more to be said about how security is implicated in material dispossession and race-making beyond what we are able to detail here. We propose five starting points for apprehending the intersections of race–security.

Violent histories of security

In locating the material foundations of security, we take our cue from Marxist critiques of security, which illuminate the work that security performs for colonization and capital. In contrast to critical security studies’ ambivalent position on how security serves structures of domination, Marxist

approaches locate security in relation to liberal thought and the emergence of capitalism, apprehending the key ideological and material roles that security plays in accumulation. Marxist critiques of security de-fetishize security as ‘a *good thing*’ – that is, ‘some kind of universal or transcendental value’ – instead situating it ‘as a mode of governing, a political technology that serves to “colonise” categories, places and spaces and through which individuals, groups, classes, and, ultimately, modern capital is reshaped and reordered’ (Neocleous, 2008: 3–4, emphasis in original). This work builds directly on Mark Neocleous’s (2000: 43) critical theorization of police power, which situates security as ‘the supreme concept of bourgeois society’, bound up with the fabrication of social order. ‘Fabrication’, in this account, concerns how policing and security work to produce social orders under capitalism, as well as the ideological, euphemistic and illusory dimensions of this work. As Neocleous (2016: 11) writes, ‘Security is ranged against us. But if today the world wants to be deceived, it wants to be deceived in the name of security.’ This literature has further developed the critical concept of ‘pacification’ to apprehend the linkages between historical colonial wars and contemporary security projects, offering ‘the potential to demonstrate how this history weighs on and is often perpetuated in the present’ (Neocleous et al., 2013: 4).

Taken together, Marxist literatures offer a framework with which to apprehend security’s role in material accumulation by dispossession by situating policing and security in the *longue durée* of empire and capitalism. Crucially, this literature also opens space in which to mobilize against security’s pacifying and colonizing imperatives (Pasternak and Dafnos, 2018). Indeed, Marxists reject security wholesale, calling it out as a ‘*dangerous* illusion’ that serves as a ‘blockage on politics’ by evacuating a focus on exploitation, alienation and the material foundations of emancipation and spurning complicity in the exercise of police powers (Neocleous and Rigakos, 2011: 15, emphasis in original). Thus, in contrast to critical security studies’ longstanding attempts to rehabilitate security by deepening, broadening, humanizing and engendering it, or otherwise making it more palatable and inclusive, Marxist accounts radically reorientate the objectives of critical security research to inform new repertoires of struggle around an *anti-security politics*. While some of this work is widely cited within critical security studies, its calls to foreground material considerations and reject security per se are less reflected in the field’s orientation.

However, core texts within Marxist literatures only tangentially engage with race and racism. They thereby elide the ways in which race-making is foundational to capitalism, empire (Quijano, 2000; Robinson, 2000) and, by extension, security. Recent interventions in Marxist security thinking have begun to rectify this blind spot. This work productively explores how projects of pacification and their material dispossession take place through race-making (McQuade, 2019; Schrader, 2019; Seigel, 2018; Wall, 2016). Nikhil Pal Singh (2017: 27) draws attention to a ‘racialized narrative of security’ that emerged in the settler-colonial project of the United States, which ‘invested every white person with the sovereign right to kill’. Such violence, he argues, was justified as ‘a humanizing endeavor, civilizing process, and security project’ (Singh, 2017: 43). Eli Jelly-Schapiro (2018: 30) stresses that ‘race is both that against which society must be secured and the means of its securing’. Scholars from outside pacification and anti-security literatures echo these claims, locating security and surveillance as distinctly racial projects (Amar, 2011; Browne, 2015; Dunbar-Ortiz, 2018; Kumar, 2020; Miller, 2017). In her work on Palestine/Israel, Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian (2015) argues that Israeli ‘security’ functions as a settler-colonial ‘theology’ that makes possible the demonization and elimination of Palestinians through their racialization.

These interrogations of race–security point toward two key things. First, security projects and the kinds of social orders they fabricate are *always already* racial orders predicated on the production of racialized Others in need of differentiation and/or elimination. Second, security works euphemistically as a political technology fundamentally tied to imperatives of white supremacy, which justify racialized violence *as security*. While highly instructive, these insights remain

theoretically underdeveloped. In order to better theorize security's roles in race-making and white supremacy, the next section illustrates how three key concepts (racial capitalism, coloniality of power and racialization) can help us think through the intersections of race-making, empire, capitalism and security more systematically.

Race, racism, racialization

Racial differentiation and its associated forms of violent dispossession are foundational of and intrinsic to historical capitalism, as elaborated by Cedric Robinson's (2000) concept of 'racial capitalism' and Anibal Quijano's (2000) notion of the 'coloniality of power'. Capitalism, race-making and empire must therefore be theorized in conjunction, yet without it being assumed that their violent structures are fixed. In unpacking the social construction of race and its relation to structures of power, critical race theory's theorizations of racialization offer additional insights into race-making as ongoing processes involving 'the extension of racial meaning to a previously unclassified relationship, social practice or group' (Omi and Winant, 2014: 111). In this framework, race and racism are dynamic, yet guided by certain historical prerogatives. While importantly challenging the notion of race as based on biological essences, the racialization framework situates race as historically evolving but also as doing particular kinds of work. It is in this sense that Patrick Wolfe (2016) argues that race can be understood as a 'trace of history'. Race is deeply ideological and works performatively in the service of empire and capital: 'rather than simply describing human groups, [race] brings them into being as inter-relating social categories with behavioural prescriptions to match. Racialization refers to this active productivity of race, whereby colonialism refashions its human terrain' (Wolfe, 2016: 10). This dual focus on race's productivity and dynamism enables us to apprehend its continuities with historical forms of social differentiation as well as its ever-shifting targets and contradictions across time and space. Indeed, Singh (2012: 288–289) argues that racialization can help us to more fully grasp 'the empty foundationalism and ceaseless reinventedness that seems to characterize the operation of race in modernity . . . "the changing same"'.

Racialization addresses *how* racism functions to racialize and oppress certain populations, and how the vulnerabilities and forms of protection produced by racism work in governing. As Singh (2012: 284–285) proposes,

to answer the vexing question, What is racism? one needs to begin not by identifying a set of preexisting, already categorized groups that are done to, but rather by delineating the formation and institutionalization of structures and situations of protection and vulnerability for which post hoc, descriptive accounts of dishonored group characteristics serve as a form of rationalization or justification.

A focus on racialization or 'race in action' thus allows us to address precursors of formal racial doctrine and apprehend how various 'racializing practices' attempt to preserve population-centric modes of colonial domination over time through *racism* (Wolfe, 2016: 10). Racism is produced through histories and structures, but also through a particular kind of violence, including the violence of demarcation. As Ruth Wilson Gilmore puts it, although 'race has no essence, racism does. Racism is singular because, whatever its place-based particularities, its practitioners renew *fatal* power-difference couplings' (Gilmore, 2002: 16, emphasis in original). This approach to racism locates the fatalities it produces – that is, 'premature deaths' – as constitutive of contemporary political power and subjectivities. As Gilmore (2002: 16) continues, 'racism is a practice of abstraction, a death-dealing displacement of difference into hierarchies that organize relations within and between the planet's sovereign political territories'. Following Singh and Gilmore, Stuart Schrader

(2019: 39–41) similarly explains: ‘Race is not racism’s predetermined object; it is what racism produces. . . . Racism produces the benefit from state projects of race-making’ – that is, whiteness. In other words, race produces racism through racialization, which in turn accrues particular material benefits to certain groups in the form of whiteness, through its denial to others. This enables identity and ‘community’ formation around racial hatred and the *shared* defence of whiteness (Ahmed, 2004: 118) and strategies to eliminate Blackness. Racism thereby (re)produces and naturalizes racial hierarchies as ‘commonsense’ markers of global difference and knowledge production (Quijano, 2000, 2007).

Bringing this literature on racialization together with critical concepts of racial capitalism and the coloniality of power provides an analytical framework for critically apprehending and situating race in the study of security. Rather than taking racial categories and their power structures, sites and objects for granted, these structural accounts of race and racism ask us to address: (1) *what* are the structural drivers of race-making, (2) *how* does racialization takes place across time and space, and (3) *with what* effects.

Posing such questions is crucial for any critical interrogations of race–security going forward, offering opportunities to further Marxist theorizations of security. For instance, if we read Neocleous’s (2016) *The Universal Adversary* through the lenses of racial capitalism, the coloniality of power and racialization, it becomes visible how the enemies that animate security projects are constituted through structures of race. Neocleous situates the ‘Universal Adversary’ as the central figure against which security has been organized from its inception in liberal thought. ‘Bourgeois modernity’, Neocleous argues, ‘is oriented around the imagination of an Enemy. This is so because the fear of *some kind* of Enemy is a fundamental feature of the supreme concept of bourgeois society: security’ (Neocleous, 2016: 1, emphasis added). While *The Universal Adversary* is limited by its lack of direct attention to race, Neocleous’s account bears striking resemblance to Singh’s (2012: 288–289) references to the ‘empty foundationalism’ and ‘ceaseless reinventedness’ of race in modernity. Neocleous (2016: 4) argues that the Universal Enemy’s ‘ghostly emptiness’ is a central defining feature, leaving the ‘category of the Enemy open to endless modification’, thereby providing the ‘power to pronounce on what the Enemy is, where it can be found and how it behaves’.

We suggest that these similarities are not incidental and provide good reasons to suspect that the Universal Enemy cannot be understood outside of race-making.¹ The Enemy is a figure that does work in organizing security in bourgeois society not merely as *some kind* of other but as a *racial* Other. This is illustrated by Darryl Li’s (2019) path-breaking *The Universal Enemy*, which aptly demonstrates how logics and practices of war, violence and dispossession, as well as struggles for justice against empire, are animated by racialization. Li shows that the universalist aspirations of these projects work with and through the production of differences, including racial difference that are in processes of reformation.

Bringing these insights back to questions of security, we are inspired by critical work that identifies racial differentiation as foundational to policing (Coleman and Kocher, 2019; Elliott-Cooper, 2018; Go, 2020; Kelley, 2016; Nijjar, 2018). Singh (2014: 1092) notes that the ‘constitution of . . . predictive, self-aggrandizing, and probabilistically defined [police] power . . . was inextricable from plural forms of racial differentiation against which an elastic and inclusive sense of whiteness coalesced as political subjectivity’. Drawing on Singh’s (2014) terminology of ‘the whiteness of police’, we argue that critical security studies needs to contend with the *whiteness of security*. By this we mean attending to the particular roles that security logics and their rootedness in imaginations of spectral enemy Others play in the exercise of group-differentiated violence. Pairing insights from literature on race-making with Marxist accounts of security opens crucial possibilities to grapple with the intersections of race–security more readily and situate them in core

conceptualizations of what security *is* and *does*. Literatures on racialization further make visible the political imperatives to refuse and actively denaturalize racial categories.

Abolition–security

Implicit in our discussion are questions about how to articulate a more radical and anti-racist agenda in critical security studies. Here, the Marxist anti-security ethos lays crucial groundwork by rejecting security and opening spaces in which to ‘fight for an alternative language that takes us beyond the narrow horizon of bourgeois security and its police powers’ (Neocleous and Rigakos, 2011: 21). This imperative dovetails with core strands of abolitionist thinking. Brendan McQuade (2018: 5) argues that pairing abolitionist traditions with Marxist critiques of security is politically and analytically productive: ‘Abolition is the foil of bourgeoisie security. Where security discourses are concerned with fabrication of capitalist forms of social order, abolition is a way of thinking about producing social order outside of the logic of capital and private property, state violence, and racialized subjectivity.’ We agree.

From the outset, abolitionist thought and praxis have apprehended capitalism, race-making, empire and violence as conjoined and developed strategies to fight them accordingly. Abolitionist thinking rejects liberal reformist paradigms of trying to make carceral and policing institutions more humane, recognizing that the racialized domination these institutions mete out serves structural imperatives (Gilmore, 2007). The violence of the carceral state cannot be abstracted from other aspects of domination under capitalism and empire. The central ‘challenge’ of abolitionist thinking, Gilmore (2017: 228) writes, ‘is to keep the entirety of carceral geographies – rather than only their prison or even law-enforcement aspects – connected, without collapsing or reducing various aspects into each other’. While contending with how capitalism works in conjunction with race-making, abolitionism refuses to reify carceral structures’ totalizing pretences, in part by challenging their self-implied necessity, desirability and economic efficiency. Abolitionist thinkers centre how structures of racialized violence are both reproduced and disrupted by human interaction. As Gilmore (2017: 238) stresses, ‘abolition geography takes feeling and agency to be constitutive of, no less than constrained by, structure’. Indeed, one of Gilmore’s most important contributions is to foreground the ‘flesh-and-blood perspective on incarceration and the unexpected alliances that might be forged in the face of dispossessed isolation’ (McKittrick, 2011: 958).

Abolitionist work is concerned with developing strategies to dismantle carceral technologies and their geographies. It does so by establishing community networks outside of the racialized hierarchies that underpin capitalism and empire, providing concrete strategies for redirecting resources for policing, prisons and war towards developing more humane and liberated ways of living (McQuade, 2018: 4). Abolitionist praxis emerges from the inspiration and strategies of the flight and fugitivity of maroon communities that escaped slavery, established new communities and organized to upend the structures of slavery (Du Bois, [1935] 2017). It recovers the histories of ‘community building, where the terror and violence of racial capitalism and white supremacy were temporarily suspended, free men and women negotiated their own terms of living, and, in the process, negated the terms of order’ (Quan, 2017: 174–175). Abolitionist thought and praxis thereby provide visions beyond racial capitalism and the group-differentiated violence it reproduces.

We argue that traditions of abolitionism offer conceptual and practical strategies for undoing the structures of race that animate security projects by providing models for ungovernability (Quan, 2017), both the existence of a consciousness outside of domination and the possibility of refashioning communities around this consciousness. Moreover, these traditions provide fertile ground on which to build alternative futures beyond prevailing states of (in)security, yet on a distinctly

different footing than prevailing horizons of emancipation within critical security studies. Simply put, rather than seeking to cultivate security *otherwise*, abolitionist thought and praxis expand the horizons of anti-security's challenge to security per se. If security enforces violent capitalist and imperial orders underpinned by race and racism, then the prospects of security as emancipation are fanciful at best. An abolitionist disposition clarifies the political and material stakes of our investments in 'security' as academic producers of knowledge.

Race–security: New starting points

Here, we identify five points that can guide critical security studies debates vis-a-vis race. Our suggestions are far from exhaustive but touch upon, as we see things, matters that are in need of pressing attention. We situate these as part of furthering methodological thinking in critical security studies (Aradau et al., 2015; De Goede et al., 2019; Salter and Mutlu, 2013), which only addresses race and the coloniality of power tangentially.

1. Security's violent histories and raced foundations should inform how we approach security per se. 'Race' has been approached as an optional category of analysis that certain specialists of race attend to and others can ignore. However, following Alison Howell's (2018: 120) questioning of the idea of liberal politics as 'un-security or un-military', we argue that we should similarly question the notion of security as un-raced. We need to begin from the premise of the *always already* connectedness of race–security.
2. Taking race seriously in critical security studies means locating security within its material conditions of possibility and actively de-fetishizing it. Racism is an abstraction that produces fetishes (Gilmore, 2002), and security is one such fetish (Neocleous, 2008). Security is fetishized and normalized through histories of anti-Black racism whose 'central concern [is] of the libidinal and affective economies that animate historical capitalism' (McQuade, 2018: 13). De-fetishizing security means beginning to situate behaviours and meanings in their social, historical and cultural contexts, as a means of challenging essentialist and deterministic analysis. When we anchor security projects in specific milieus, we begin to understand the work they do in hiding racial violence and dispossession, their impacts and the complicity of academics therein.
3. We can never apprehend the intersections of race–security as somehow exceptional or geographically isolated. Rather, the focus needs to be on how race is produced through transnational and transtemporal encounters, in the sense that 'racial ideas, meanings, exclusionary and repressive practices in one place are influenced, shaped by and fuel those elsewhere' (Goldberg, 2009: 1274). Nevertheless, we should anticipate that the relationships between racialization and security are highly varied, which requires that they be investigated in local articulations. Such an approach develops a historical sensitivity to how security's racializing imperatives travel and push peripheral states or groups to perform the 'dirty work' of capital and national (in)security (Agathangelou, 2004: 2).
4. Rejecting security as a fabrication, a myth and a lie requires refusing and actively unstitching the categories that security takes as given. Against the prevailing tendency in critical security studies to focus on how racialized communities are further disenfranchised or 'securitized', we cannot take othered populations as given. Rather, the focus needs to be on how security regimes, ideas and prerogatives work to render populations as 'out of place' (Wolfe, 2016: 17) and therefore in need of targeting, erasure or removal through security. We must address how specific technologies of security help to make race and racial

subjugation rather than reproducing ‘epistemological organization through which some bodies are damned, and others are not’ (McKittrick, 2011: 958).

5. If we take the imperatives of de-fetishization and abolitionism seriously, how we refer to the key actors involved in ‘security’ matters. This prompts us to ask new questions: Should we, for instance, reproduce their own self-presentation as ‘security professionals’ (Bigo, 2002) or instead try to rename them in a way that foregrounds the raced and violent foundations of their work? Here, some have notably proposed that ‘law enforcement’ officers be renamed ‘violence workers’ (Seigel, 2018) and security practitioners as ‘security fuckers’ (James Kelman, cited in Neocleous, 2008: 1).

Conclusion

Although critical security studies has been able to cultivate distance from state logics and projects through its critical disposition, the specific criticality of this disposition remains ambivalent. As we argue, critical security studies has eschewed structural considerations required for a serious apprehension of race in the field going forward. Without specifying the structural imperatives underpinning race-making and the material ends they serve, talking about ‘race’ and ‘racism’ in security studies is superficial if not entirely meaningless. Moreover, critical security studies has indulged the fetish of security, the seductiveness of which is bound up with the disavowal of security’s key role in the violence that accrues value to whiteness. Like all political and governing technologies – not least of all race itself – we should expect the meaning of ‘security’ and its associated modalities and relationships to race, capital and empire to change over time. How race and racism figure into any particular kind of security analysis is not something to be assumed ahead of time; it remains the task of the analyst to investigate empirically. Yet to imply that security imperatives or projects can be bracketed off and thereby abstracted from their long histories of white supremacist violence and colonial dispossession is naïve and untenable. We must recognize that security and race-making are deeply ideological projects that work to actively disavow and obscure their underlying drivers and imperatives. This means that we should anticipate the racialized practices of state power to work as ‘disappearing act[s]’, which hide in plain sight yet are difficult to concretely nail down (Coleman and Kocher, 2019: 1189). However, we want to be clear about where Marxist insights take us, but also where they fall short and need to be remade. Notwithstanding Marxism’s own complicity in Eurocentrism and ‘methodological whiteness’ (Bhambra, 2017), we have followed others’ efforts to build on its core insights and update them through discussions about the intersections of violence, dispossession and race (Gilmore, 2007; Quijano, 2000; Robinson, 2000). Shifting the analytic frame away from the traditional focus on the proletarianization of workers in commodity production toward subject positions of the colonized in relation to colonial *dispossession* (Machold and Bhungalia, 2020) can help to trouble the economic reductionism in some currents of Marxian thought. This helps to recover economic tensions and contradictions at work in security projects rather than assuming them to be seamless and self-assured.

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Note

1. We thank Brendan McQuade for helping us make this connection.

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