

Decolonisation as Departure: Interrogating the Reconstructivist Tendencies of Australian Criminology

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In this article I critically analyse the recent “decolonial” turn within Australian criminology. Drawing upon critical Indigenous conceptualisations of decolonisation and analysing my personal confrontations with the discipline, I examine how criminologists mobilise decolonisation as a discourse rather than a praxis. By interrogating the discursive effects of recent calls to decolonise Australian criminology, I consider how criminologists mobilise decolonisation as a discourse to secure their own innocence and the futurity of Australian criminology. Building on the scholarship of Dylan Rodríguez (2021), I argue that the “decolonial” turn in Australian criminology is underpinned by a logic of “White Reconstruction”, which operates to reinscribe the discipline’s function as an accomplice to the state and inhibit possibilities for decolonial and abolitionist change. I conclude by reflecting on the implications of these reconstructivist tendencies for Indigenous scholars and scholars committed to decolonial and abolitionist praxis working within Australian criminology.

[T]he historical record discloses how professional intellectuals, and university-based academics in particular, can play a significant if underrecognized role in facilitating the damage of reformist counterinsurgency.

Dylan Rodríguez, *Weaponized Study in a Moment of (Counter) Insurgency: The Gathering Anti-“American” of American Studies*, 2022, p.200.

Over recent years, Australian criminologists have called to “decolonise the criminological toolbox” (Carrington et al., 2018), to “decolonise the criminology curriculum” (Sercombe et al., 2021), for the “decolonisation of justice” (Blagg, 2008, 2016), and even for the “decolonisation of criminology” (Blagg & Anthony, 2019). These appeals have been accompanied by the creation of new international networks such as the Decolonizing

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Criminology Network, the creation of new academic journals such as *Decolonization of Criminology and Justice*, and the publication of special editions including the edition on “Southern Criminology” in the *International Journal for Crime, Justice and Social Democracy*. At the 2020 Barry Symposium, Brinja Yuin scholar Amanda Porter (in Ironfield et al., 2021) commented on the speed at which non-Indigenous criminologists are producing ‘decolonial’ scholarship, when she expressed: “I can’t write book reviews at the rate at which non-Indigenous professors are writing books about decolonising criminology or offering their ways of imagining justice in a supposedly ‘postcolonial world’” (57:42). Porter’s words not only emphasise the recent proliferation of so-called decolonial scholarship within the Australian criminological canon but also reveal how the recent “decolonial” turn within the discipline is ironically being spearheaded by non-Indigenous, and overwhelmingly White¹ criminologists.

The “decolonial” turn within Australian criminology marks a trend across academia on a global scale. Concerningly, what is often absent in conversations about decolonisation is any meaningful engagement with or reference to Indigenous peoples, our scholarship or our continuing struggles for liberation (see, for example: Todd, 2016; Tuck & Yang, 2012; Watego, 2023). While White academics have easily adopted the term “decolonisation” in their research, they have often failed to interrogate their own relationship to the colonial project and their own complicity in upholding current systems of power (Macoun, 2016; Mayorga et al., 2019; Todd, 2016; Tuck & Yang, 2012). Further, what is often absent from this body of work is any consideration of how this “decolonial” scholarship will support Indigenous liberation or community organising, both within and beyond the academy (Crichlow, 2023). Unanga’s Critical Indigenous Studies scholar Eve Tuck and Wayne Yang (2012) have identified “the easy absorption, adoption, and transposing of decolonisation [as] yet another form of settler appropriation” (p. 3). The rapid uptake of the language of decolonisation in academic spaces has inspired River Métis/Michif scholar Max Liboiron (in Raman, 2023, para 5) to identify decolonisation as “a very promiscuous term”.

In this article I critically analyse the recent “decolonial” turn within Australian criminology. Drawing upon critical Indigenous theorisations of decolonisation and reflecting on my personal confrontations with the discipline, I consider how Australian criminologists mobilise decolonisation as a *discourse* rather than a *praxis*. By interrogating the discursive effects of recent calls to decolonise Australian criminology, I consider how criminologists deploy the language of decolonisation to secure their own innocence, by positioning themselves as outside of the ongoing

¹ In this article I make the methodological choice to capitalise “White” in an attempt to challenge the invisibility of Whiteness as a racial identity. As Nell Irvin Painter (2020) explains, “A capitalized ‘White’ challenges [the] freedom of [White people to see themselves as unracialized]...Being racialized makes White people squirm, so let’s racialize them with that capital W” (np).

violence of Australian criminology. Expanding on the scholarship of teacher, scholar, organiser and collaborator Dylan Rodríguez (2021), I argue that the “decolonial” turn in Australian criminology is underpinned by a logic of “White Reconstruction”, which operates to reinscribe Australian criminology’s function as an accomplice to the Australian colonial state while simultaneously inhibiting possibilities for decolonial and abolitionist change. I conclude by reflecting on the implications of the reconstructivist tendencies of Australian criminology for Indigenous scholars and scholars engaged in and committed to decolonial and abolitionist praxis currently working in Australian criminology.

Decolonisation as Praxis

Whilst decolonial thought, praxis and struggle is multifaceted (Fanon, 1963); Critical Indigenous Studies scholars have theorised decolonisation as a process that is inherently unsettling. Māori (Ngāti Awa and Ngāti Porou) scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012) notes, “Decolonization must offer a language of possibility, a way out of colonialism” (p. 204). A political and intellectual project that “engages with imperialism and colonialism on multiple levels,” decolonisation seeks to “bring about the repatriation of Indigenous land and life” (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 1). Concerned with Indigenous liberation, not just our survival, decolonisation embodies a commitment to divest from colonial power and the institutions that uphold it (Smith, 2012, p. 21).

In defining decolonisation, Tanganeald and Meintangk legal scholar Irene Watson (2015) begins by querying “what future lies beyond the liberal state?” (p. 148). Alluding to the incommensurabilities between decolonisation and a liberal political ideology, Watson argues that decolonisation must “decentre Western political theories and a global order, which is regulated by linear thinking that has produced a colonial matrix of power that holds dispossession of those colonised by the state at its core” (p. 149). Underpinned by a recognition that liberal reforms seeking to “fix” colonial institutions will not undo the underlying racist and colonial function of these institutions, decolonisation rather seeks to actively confront what Rodríguez (2021) terms the “fraud of white liberal futurity” (p. 233). Rejecting the presumption that recognition and rights should be central to matters of Indigenous justice and liberation, decolonisation rather embodies a recognition that liberal theories of justice will not emancipate Indigenous people from the continuing and unrelenting violence of the colonial state (see, for example: Coulthard, 2014; Simpson, 2014; Watson, 2015). Accordingly, decolonisation seeks to recentre “a sovereign land-owning and self-determining identity [by moving beyond] simplistic acknowledgements of traditions, cultures and customs and human rights” (Watson, 2015, p. 79).

As “decolonisation is not an ‘and’. It is an elsewhere” (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 36), decolonisation “is *not* about tweaking the existing colonial system to make it more Indigenous-friendly or a little less oppressive” (Wilson

& Yellow Bird, 2005, p. 4, emphasis original). Rather, as Leila Shomali (Palestinian) and Lara Kilani (Palestinian-American) write in relation to the ongoing struggle against Zionist settler colonialism in Palestine, decolonisation seeks “the deconstruction of the settler state and the violence inherent to it” (Shomali & Kilani, 2023, para 16). Accountable to Indigenous futurity and Indigenous sovereignties (Tuck & Yang, 2012), decolonisation seeks to dismantle the institutions and structures that uphold the unfreedom of Indigenous peoples (Wilson & Yellow Bird, 2005). Consequently, “decolonize (a verb) and decolonization (a noun) cannot easily be grafted onto pre-existing discourses/frameworks, even if they are critical, even if they are anti-racist, even if they are justice frameworks” (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 3).

In recognition of the shape-shifting nature of colonisation, Smith (2024) argues that those engaged in decolonising work must actively set out to confront the systems that have been designed to kill Indigenous people. Contending that decolonising work must seek to address the continuing effects of colonisation, Smith (2024) also emphasises that those engaged in decolonising work must seek to uncover truths about the ongoing impact of colonisation. Calling on Indigenous peoples to identify the “invisible systems which give power to the systems that we see”, Smith (2024, np) argues that decolonising work simultaneously requires us to imagine and rebuild alternative relations and systems.

While decolonisation must centre Indigenous epistemologies and ontologies (Smith, 2024), Smith’s conceptualisation of decolonising work emphasizes that decolonisation is *not* an academic exercise. While decolonising work requires Indigenous people to collectively analyse and theorise the conditions under which we live, Smith’s conceptualisation of decolonisation gestures to the ways in which decolonisation functions as a praxis in Indigenous liberation movements: a processes of “reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it” (Freire, 1993, p. 25).

In relation to my own positionality as a Dharug scholar working in Australian criminology who is committed to and involved in decolonial and abolitionist liberation movements, Smith’s (2024) conceptualisation of decolonisation provokes a consideration of why prison-industrial complex abolition must be conceptualised as an essential component of a decolonial praxis. Further, Smith’s conceptualisation of decolonisation also facilitates a consideration of how Australian criminology may function as a kind of “invisible system” which empowers the Australian colonial state. I expand on these points below.

Identifying Systems Designed to Kill Indigenous People

Among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander scholars, organisers, and communities it is widely recognised that since initial invasion, carceral systems of surveillance, policing and imprisonment have been utilised to facilitate

access to Indigenous lands and to establish and maintain what Goenpul scholar Aileen Moreton-Robinson (2015) has termed “patriarchal White sovereignty” (see, for example: Charles, 2023; McKinnon, 2020; Moreton-Robinson, 2015; Porter, 2024; Roach, 2022). Historically, systems of surveillance, policing and imprisonment were used by British colonisers to dispossess Indigenous peoples and to uphold newly imposed settler sovereignty. As Yuin woman Auntie Vickie Roach (2022) observes, “the brutality of the police and prisons started with colonisation” (p.36). While the distinctive roles of imprisonment, policing and surveillance have changed over time, carceral systems must be understood as one of the regulatory mechanisms used to uphold Indigenous dispossession and sustain “the life and continuity of the state” (Watson, 2009, p. 45).

If a decolonial praxis requires Indigenous people to confront and dismantle the institutions that have been designed to kill Indigenous people (Smith, 2024), then within the context of the Australian colony, prison-industrial complex abolition should be conceptualised as an essential component of a decolonial praxis. While prison-industrial complex abolition was pushed into the mainstream in 2020 following the killing of African American man George Floyd by four Minneapolis police officers, contemporary movements calling for the abolition of carceral systems of surveillance, policing and imprisonment have a long lineage in radical liberation movements, most notably the Black Radical Tradition (Wilson Gilmore, 2022). In contending with how the project of Black radicalism has informed contemporary abolitionist movements, Fred Moten (in Harney et al., 2013) argues that Black radicalism is “not about debt collection or reparations” but rather “about a complete overturning” of things (p. 151). While Moten acknowledges that some debts must be paid, he also stresses that “what is supposed to be repaired is irreparable” (p. 152). Gesturing to the limits of reparations, Moten argues that “the only thing we can do is tear this shit down completely and build something new” (p. 152).

Embodying a recognition that carceral systems cannot be “fixed” or untethered from the “originary violence” (Watson, 2009, p. 167) that they were created to uphold (Rodríguez, 2021), abolition is a project, praxis and political organising strategy premised on an understanding that “we cannot have true justice alongside or within the carceral state” (Kilroy in Lean, 2023, p. 19). Aiming to “expose the inadequacy of liberal-to-progressive reformist approaches”, an abolitionist praxis seeks to overturn the systems of power which uphold racist, capitalist, and colonial logics in the present day (Rodríguez, 2021, p. 215). As Shillan Shebly (2025) explains, “abolition is an anti: colonial, racist, sexist, ableist, capitalist, imperialist, homophobic, transphobic project that betrays the mobilisation and (re)production of tools, techniques and discourses that expand the carceral-continuum”. As such, like decolonisation, an abolitionist praxis also seeks to identify the “invisible systems” (Smith, 2024, np) that continue to give power to the carceral state.

Identifying Invisible Systems

Criminology departments (and criminologists) often position themselves as neutral and objective entities that exist outside of the carceral state. However, Australian criminology's foundational and contemporary role in producing and sustaining colonial power relations undoubtedly gestures to the discipline functions as an "invisible system" which gives power to the state. Munanjahli and South Sea Islander woman Chelsea Watego (2021) has called attention to the epistemic violence inherent to Australian criminology, both in terms of the ways in which criminology continues to construct Black criminality through the language of "criminogenic effects" and in relation to the discipline's continued indifference to the injustice that Aboriginal people experience at the hand of the state. Yuin scholar Amanda Porter has identified the presence of what Narungga, Kurna and Ngarrindjeri man Lester Rigney (2001) has termed *Intellectual Nullius* within the Australian criminological canon, highlighting the discipline's persistent failure to engage with Aboriginal (intellectual) sovereignties and resistance. Elsewhere, I have argued that Australian criminology is best conceptualised as an accomplice to the state, drawing attention to the foundational and contemporary role of the discipline in (re)affirming and (re)producing the knowledges and discourses which enable the state to sustain and extend its carceral relationship with Aboriginal people (Ironfield, 2024).

Conceptualising Australian criminology as an "invisible system" that operates in service of the colonial state provokes several questions about how criminologists engage with decolonial thought and praxis, and importantly, what scholars gain from adopting the term 'decolonisation' in their research. The proliferation of "decolonial" criminological scholarship also raises questions about the material effects of this scholarship for Aboriginal people. Does this body of work challenge the racist and colonial foundations of Australian criminology, or disrupt the discipline's relationship with the state? Or, conversely, does this scholarship function to reaffirm the permanency of Australian criminology by perpetuating a narrative that the discipline can be decolonised?

Below I reflect on my personal confrontations with Australian criminology to demonstrate how Australian criminologists mobilise decolonisation as a discourse rather than a praxis. Discourses are neither free-floating nor benevolent but rather are anchored by, and can correlate with, the structural conditions of the Australian colony. Consequently, discourses can function in service of the possessive logics of the Australian state (Moreton-Robinson, 2015). By examining how Australian criminologists mobilise decolonisation as a discourse, I seek to interrogate the discursive effects and structural implications of discourses calling for the "decolonisation" of Australian criminology. In doing so, I keep in mind Eualeyai and Kamillaroi scholar Larissa Behrendt's (2016) contention that a political motivation often "accompanies the telling of any story" (p. 9).

Decolonisation as discourse

Since I began working within Australian criminology, I have observed a tendency amongst criminologists to separate themselves from the historic and continuing violence of criminology in its relationship to Indigenous peoples. Failing to interrogate how this violence is ongoing, or how they may be implicated in it, I have witnessed an inability amongst criminologists to reflect on the role that their own research may play in upholding and extending carceral violence enacted by the state. Often failing to make explicit their own positionality as (most-commonly White) settlers, I have witnessed critical criminologists acknowledge the violence of “mainstream” criminological research for Indigenous peoples while simultaneously separating themselves and their research from this violence. In critical criminological scholarship, in departmental meetings, at criminology conferences and on social media, I have witnessed critical criminologists speak to the shortcomings and harmful implications of what they term “mainstream” or “positivist” criminological research while simultaneously failing to consider how their own “critical” or “decolonial” research may also be contributing to the violence that Indigenous people experience in carceral systems.

British social scientist Stanley Cohen (1987) has previously commented on this phenomenon within the discipline of criminology, suggesting that by labelling oneself as “critical,” individuals seek to claim an alternative identity while simultaneously maintaining “a curiously ambivalent relationship” with the discipline (p. 9). Conceptualising this behaviour as “role distancing”, Cohen (1987) suggests that role distancing is apparent when critical criminologists enact “a refusal to be identified as a criminologist ‘like the rest of them’” (p. 9). Arguing that this behaviour may in fact be “a form of collective bad faith”, Cohen (1987) contends that critical criminologists “attribute responsibility to something out there, the discipline of criminology, that in fact we were very much part of” (p. 9). In doing so, critical criminologists enact a “a safe radicalism,” by “making a good living by denouncing the very institution by which [they] live” (Cohen, 1987, p. 9).

This phenomenon of role distancing is apparent in the scholarship of Australian criminologists advocating for the decolonisation of Australian criminology. For example, on several occasions throughout their text *Decolonizing Criminology: Imagining Justice in a Postcolonial World*, Harry Blagg and Thalia Anthony (2019) acknowledge the violence of “mainstream” criminology for Indigenous people.² At times, they also warn of the harmful implications of critical iterations of criminology for Indigenous peoples.³

² See pages 13, 323.

³ See pages 8, 9.

While they acknowledge the harmful implications of criminological research for Indigenous people, they simultaneously distance themselves from their role as active members of the discipline.

This phenomenon of “role distancing” has caused me to reckon with how Australian criminologists deploy the language of “decolonisation” to mark a departure. There is an unnamed but implicit assumption amongst those advocating for the decolonisation of Australian criminology that being “critical” of the discipline, suspends their role in (re)affirming and (re)producing the knowledges and discourses which enable the state to uphold its carceral relationship with Aboriginal people. Through this process criminologists transform decolonisation into a marker of identity. Here, decolonisation functions discursively to create a false dichotomy between “decolonial” iterations of criminology and the kinds of “mainstream,” “positivist,” or indeed “critical” criminologies that “decolonial” criminologists themselves critique. As Sara Ahmed (2004) has previously argued in relation to the field of Critical Whiteness Studies, “the ‘critical’ cannot guarantee that it will have effects that are critical, in the sense of challenging relations of power that remain concealed as institutional norms or givens” (np). Similarly, the field of “decolonial” criminology does not guarantee that “decolonial” criminological scholarship will have *decolonial* effects and disrupt the racial and colonial foundations of the discipline or its function as an accomplice to the state.

The practice of “role distancing” gestures to the ways in which criminologists deploy decolonisation as a discourse to secure their own innocence. By suggesting that their “decolonial” approaches to doing criminology are inherently more liberatory for Indigenous peoples, criminologists advocating for the decolonisation of criminology frame themselves as being able to transcend the racist and colonial foundations of the discipline that they themselves critique. By positioning themselves as “agents of progressive futurity” (Macoun, 2016, p. 86) who produce scholarship in services of Aboriginal liberation movements, criminologists deploy decolonisation as a discourse to obscure their own investment in sustaining Australian criminology. As Watego (2021, p. 46.17) has previously argued, “when it comes to the criminologists, their anti-abolitionist stance is not a failure of imagination, but a steadfast refusal to carve out an alternative career.”

The phenomenon of “role distancing” in conjunction with my experiences working in relation to criminologists who position themselves as “decolonial” has led me to question: what does it mean for criminologists to position themselves as “decolonial” while their scholarship may simultaneously operate to (re)inscribe the discipline’s function as an accomplice to the state? Extending upon Tuck and Yang’s (2012, p. 10) conceptualisation of “settler moves to innocence”, I have also come to query how criminologists might enact their own moves to innocence in relation to Aboriginal people and our

ongoing liberation struggles, to relieve “feelings of guilt and responsibility without giving up land or power or privilege, without having to change much at all.”

My personal encounters with Australian criminology have caused me to reckon with the ease at which criminologists deploy the term “decolonisation” and their notable anxiety when it comes to the term “abolition”. In March 2021, I organised and chaired the 2020 John Barry Memorial Lecture at The University of Melbourne. Joined by Tabitha Lean, Latoya Rule, Amanda Porter and Alison Whittaker, this lecture spoke explicitly to complicity of criminologists in enabling the state-sanctioned violence enacted by carceral systems against Aboriginal people. As Rule (in Ironfield et al., 2021, pp. 86, 00) expressed, “this is such a critical moment for all of us to have this conversation around how criminology itself is perpetrating violence through the system of Aboriginal deaths in custody, and for that school of thought and that ideology to take accountability for this grief”. Whilst directly confronting the epistemic violence of this discipline, this lecture also served as a call to action for Australian criminology. Presenting an invitation for Australian criminologists to take accountability for the harm and violence that the discipline enables, the panellists encouraged criminologists to engage with an abolitionist praxis.

When the Department first announced this event on Twitter, the lecture was framed as a “provocative discussion” (University of Melbourne Criminology, 2020). Since entering the discipline in 2019 I have regularly borne witness to the ways in which White criminologists dismiss Aboriginal critique and our imaginings for liberatory futures by framing our demands as either “provocative” or “unrealistic”. In this context, I have observed a disciplinary refusal to meaningfully engage with Aboriginal organising, advocacy, theorising and praxis, and instead frame abolitionist demands as either idealistic or impractical.

At a meeting I attended following this public lecture, a senior university staff member praised the Criminology Department for programming this public lecture. Highlighting the important work that the Department was doing for Indigenous people, this individual sought to separate the Criminology Department at the University of Melbourne from the ongoing violence of criminology explicitly named in this public lecture. Simultaneously, this individual congratulated the Department for providing Indigenous people with a platform to speak. Through this process, critiques of the epistemic violence of the discipline paradoxically operated to create an opportunity for the Department to congratulate itself on its good performance (Ahmed, 2006), without confronting how the epistemic violence of the discipline explicitly named in the public lecture functioned within the criminology Department at my university.

While this public lecture gestured to the Department's commitment to engaging with an abolitionist praxis, this did not result in a meaningful shift in the Department's carceral research or teaching practices. Four years on from this lecture, this Department continues to position carceral agencies as key stakeholders in the design and delivery of its programs through its Master of Criminology Advisory Board, offer internships with state institutions such as Victoria Police and the Department of Justice (The University of Melbourne, 2024a), and actively market its postgraduate teaching program to recruit individuals who already work for—or hope to work for—the carceral state (The University of Melbourne, 2024b).

As outlined above, a decolonial praxis actively seeks to confront and dismantle colonial institutions that have been designed to kill Indigenous people (Smith, 2024). As Australian carceral systems continue to be fundamental mechanisms used by the Australian colonial state to enact racial and colonial violence, abolition must be understood as a necessary and essential component of a decolonial praxis. However, criminologists advocating for the decolonisation of Australian criminology rarely contend with the relationship between decolonisation and abolition. For example, while the words “decolonisation,” “decolonising,” “decolonial” and “decolonised” can be counted over 200 times in Blagg and Anthony's (2019) text *Decolonising Criminology: Imaging Justice in Postcolonial World*, the words “abolition” and “abolitionism” can only be counted on five occasions.⁴

While Blagg and Anthony interrogate the racial and colonial function of carceral systems of surveillance, policing and imprisonment, they do not consider why abolition should be conceptualised as an essential component of a decolonial praxis. Further, the way they deploy the term “abolition” also gestures to the misappropriation of abolition thought and praxis. Far from being just “an ultimate objective” (Blagg & Anthony, p. 154), as Wilson Gilmore (2022) reminds us, “abolition is a totality, and it is ontological” (p. 44). Further as Rodríguez (2022) reminds us, “[Abolition] is an everyday practice, a method of teaching, creating, thinking, and doing that exposes the pitfalls of the reformist counterinsurgency. Abolition is collective genius as well as an analytical labour, organizing method, and way of making community with each other” (p. 211). By conceptualising abolition as an “ultimate objective,” rather than a praxis, Blagg and Anthony do not consider the multitude of ways in which Aboriginal communities are actively responding to carceral violence and resisting in ways that seek to further destabilise the underlying structures of the Australian carceral state.

⁴ See pages 12–13, 46 and 154.

While Blagg and Anthony (2019) briefly acknowledge the interdependent relationship between criminology and the prison-industrial complex, less considered in their analysis is how “decolonising” criminology, without abolishing criminology, will unsettle the discipline’s function as an accomplice to the state. While they acknowledge the discipline’s role in enabling the violence that Indigenous people experience in carceral systems, they do not examine why the abolition of criminology may be a necessary component of their decolonising agenda. The absence of such an analysis is perhaps unsurprising given that the central premise of their text—that it is possible to decolonise criminology without abolishing criminology—inadvertently exposes how their “decolonial agenda” is underpinned by a reformist political ideology, which seeks to “fix” Australian criminology through processes of readjustment and reform. By advocating for the “decolonisation” of a discipline founded in service of colonial and imperial expansion (Agozino, 2003), Blagg and Anthony implicitly argue that criminology can and should be reformed.

By championing a narrative that criminology *can* be decolonised, Australian criminologists “expropriate and domesticate” (Williams & Kisslinger, 2024, pp. 22, 00) decolonial thought and praxis in service of their own academic, social and political agendas. By the nature of its design, criminology was created with the intent of furthering colonial and imperial expansion and halting Indigenous access to land and life (Agozino, 2003). As such, to decolonise Australian criminology would fundamentally contradict the discipline’s foundational purpose and principal function. By deploying decolonisation as a discourse Australian criminologists advance a narrative that it is possible to decolonise Australian criminology while simultaneously reinscribing the discipline’s function as an accomplice to the Australian colonial state.

In this way, discourses calling to decolonise criminology are underpinned by a logic of White Reconstruction (Rodríguez, 2021). Rodríguez has conceptualised “White Reconstruction” as “a historically persistent, continuous, and periodically acute *logic* of reform, rearticulation, adaptation, and revitalization that shapes white social and ontological self- and world-making” (p. 3, emphasis original). Understood as a combination of efforts undertaken to maintain and reproduce racial-colonial power and anti-Blackness, White Reconstruction is “a historically specific, relatively coherent coalescence of efforts to *achieve* a condition of hegemony” (p. 9, emphasis original). Characterised as changing in form of expression over space and time, Rodríguez’s notion of White Reconstruction reveals how processes of colonialism, genocide and warfare have *always* been subject to processes of reform and rearticulation.

In its current formation, the logic of White Reconstruction manifests through the implementation of differing protocols of reform that disavow oppressive systems of power whilst simultaneously operating to *sustain and extend* these power relationships. Suggesting that these reformist narratives are driven by the “fraud of liberal white futurity”, Rodríguez’s (2021) analysis exposes how “liberal-to-progressive reformist approaches” operate to “protect and reproduce the institutional and cultural-political coherence of existing state and extra-state carceral/policing systems” by making them appear to be less violent and harmful than they were before (p. 218). In this regard, the logic of White Reconstruction functions in service of the counterinsurgent objectives of the state, by “rescu[ing], restor[ing] and revitalis[ing] the legitimacy of the state [and] the legitimacy of state power in moments when it is potentially breaking down or being radically questioned by...extraordinary ordinary people” (Rodríguez in Williams & Kisslinger, 2024, pp. 17, 50).

While criminological approaches advocating for the “decolonisation” of criminology disavow the continuing epistemic violence of the discipline, they simultaneously function to restore the legitimacy of Australian criminology, and in doing so, inhibit possibilities for abolitionist change. Failing to disentangle the relationship between “carcerality” and “justice,” criminologists advocating for the decolonisation of the discipline do not consider why within the Australian colony, decolonisation is not a reformist project but rather an abolitionist one. By mobilising decolonisation as a discourse, criminologists can position criminology as a reformable and redeemable project. Much like how carceral reformers offer the narrative of responding to a “broken” criminal justice system, criminologists advocating for the decolonisation of Australian criminology present their “decolonial” approach to criminological research as responding to the “shortfalls” of the discipline by framing their approaches as kinder, gentler and ultimately more “decolonial”, when compared with the conventional or even critical criminological approaches that they themselves critique.

Conclusion

In this article I have argued that Australian criminologists deploy decolonisation as a discourse rather than a praxis to close off considerations about whether Australian criminology should be abolished rather than reformed, given the discipline’s racist and colonial foundations. By interrogating the discursive effects and structural implications of recent calls to decolonise Australian criminology, I have shown how criminologists mobilise decolonisation as a discourse to secure their own innocence and the futurity of Australian criminology. Functioning to reinscribe rather than rupture the discipline’s foundational relationship with the state, I have shown how criminologists deploy decolonisation as a discourse to position Australian criminology as a reformable project. In this sense, the recent decolonial turn within Australian criminology should be understood as a

cosmetic reform; a kind of rebranding strategy that seeks to reaffirm rather than disrupt the discipline's function as an accomplice to the Australian colonial state.

The recent decolonial turn within Australian criminology is not unique but rather follows a broader pattern of ontological reconstruction within the discipline, epitomised over the last decade through the proliferation of “alternative”, “critical” and even “radical” criminological approaches. While these approaches are often positioned as radical departures from the “mainstream” criminological approaches that they critique, the above analysis gestures to the ways in which these ontological reconstructions can function to secure the futurity of Australian criminology and revitalise the discipline's relationship with the state.

The discipline's propensity to reconstruct itself underscores why Indigenous scholars and scholars committed to decolonial and abolitionist praxis working in Australian criminology must reject the desire for a more “critically” engaged criminology. If we acknowledge that the goals of criminology are fundamentally irreconcilable with those of decolonisation then we must not only resist the creation of any further “alternative” criminologies, but in doing so, must simultaneously work towards the abolition of criminology. North African and Palestinian scholar Vivienne Saleh-Hanna (2024) has recently gestured to the generative possibilities that lie in the abolition of criminology, arguing that “to abolish criminology's thought patterns and carceralist cultures is to plant seeds, that form roots, that can and will birth new worlds where freedom is real, and justice is tangible in our day-to-day lives” (p. 16). While I wholeheartedly agree with Saleh-Hanna's (2024) observation, Aboriginal families, communities and organisations have long been laying the foundations for a world free from racial and colonial violence. From the creation of the pig patrols and the first Aboriginal Community Controlled Legal Service in Redfern in the 1960s (Foley, 2012), to the #BanSpitHoods Coalition (Ban Spit Hoods Coalition, 2024) and the Yorta Yorta woman Aunty Tanya Day family's campaign to decriminalise public drunkenness in Victoria (Day Family, 2023), Aboriginal families, communities and organisations continue to collectively resist and respond to the carceral violence and organise in ways which set out to further destabilise the underlying structures of the Australian colonial state. This work not only takes place beyond the confines of Australian criminology but also continues despite the discipline's ongoing existence. Curiously, much of this work has also been overlooked by those advocating for the decolonisation of criminology.

The discipline's tendency towards ontological reconstruction—and the responses it elicits from scholars committed to decolonial and abolitionist praxis (I implicate myself in this critique)—raises uncomfortable questions about how a logic of liberal counterinsurgency (Rodríguez, 2022) may be

at play. The above analysis illuminates how the discipline's reconstructivist impulse is shaped by an underlying and persistent logic of liberal counterinsurgency: a logic that absorbs and neutralises critique of Australian criminology while simultaneously restoring the discipline's legitimacy by repositing it as a site of transformative and liberatory possibility. Whilst this logic materialises through the co-option, expropriation and domestication of decolonial thought and praxis, the above analysis also reveals how this logic may be sustained by those of us working in the discipline who are committed to and involved in decolonial and abolitionist liberation movements.

Since entering the discipline in 2019, I have often felt a great level of responsibility to respond to the violence perpetrated against Aboriginal people in this space. While there is undoubtedly value in holding a mirror up to Australian criminology—particularly when the epistemic violence of the discipline is increasingly materialising in more mundane, insidious and routine ways—I have also come to reckon with how the reactive nature of this intellectual work may exemplify what Māori (Ngāti Porou, Ngāi Tahu, Ngāti Apa and Ngāti) educationalist scholar Graham Hingangaroa Smith (2003) terms “a politics of distraction” (p. 2), and in turn, paradoxically works in service of the logic of liberal counterinsurgency.

The reactive position which Aboriginal scholars are regularly forced into by Australian criminology mimics a position that we are often forced into by the Australian colony; one where we find ourselves having to constantly respond to the ongoing and unrelenting violence perpetrated by the state. While we must continue to engage in this responsive work, I have come to reckon with how this reactive positioning we are forced into by the discipline may inhibit our capacity to effectively strategise and work alongside families and communities who are organising in ways that disrupt and destabilise the underlying relations of power which uphold the futurity of the state. In this sense, the reconstructivist tendencies of Australian criminology serve as an important reminder as to why Indigenous scholars and scholars committed to decolonial and abolitionist praxis currently working in the discipline must continue to build autonomous intellectual homes *beyond* Australian criminology. A world free from racial and colonial violence will not be built by Australian criminology, but through Aboriginal sovereignties, solidarity, and our resistance.

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Positionality statement

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