

‘LURID DRAMAS’: RACE AND THE LEGAL CAMPAIGNS AGAINST VICE IN BRITAIN, 1916-1930

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My current research traces the interaction between the investigation and prosecution of ‘vice’ in London, the sensationalizing of anti-vice campaigns in journalism and cinema, and constructions of race and gender in late-WWI and interwar criminal trials. Employing evidence from court cases, journalism, literary accounts, film, and magistrates’ autobiographies, I demonstrate how the statements about interracial sexuality and racial deterioration made during court trials were modified and disseminated through written and visual media. I also examine how representations of these topics in newspapers, fiction, and film worked their way back into criminal investigations and trials. In dealing with such a diverse array of sources, I have found an interdisciplinary perspective to be invaluable. The approaches of legal-cultural history, legal theory, law and literature studies, gender history, cultural theory, and postcolonial studies are all central to my analysis. Each of these modes of inquiry offers unique insights into the core issues of law, crime, morality, identity, power, and social relations that animate my research.

I focus on three major legal campaigns and their representations in press, literature, and film. The first is the campaign against illegal opium and cocaine trafficking. Before WWI, the laws regulating these substances were relatively weak. During WWI, however, both cocaine and opium were identified as serious threats to the health and wellbeing of British and Commonwealth soldiers and to the national security of Britain itself. Cocaine became a focus of criminal law because medical practitioners, police, and military officials insisted publicly that narcotics addiction among soldiers on leave was undermining military effectiveness. The wartime period also witnessed the vilification of opium trafficking in Liverpool, where Home Office officials and police detectives claimed that a Chinese-controlled smuggling ring was subverting Britain’s maritime transportation network. In the interwar period, police, magistrates, and popular journalists all asserted that illegal cocaine and opium distribution by black and Chinese residents fostered interracial sexuality, encouraged

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violation of the race and class boundaries that segregated London's working-class East End from its wealthy West End, and was causing a general breakdown in the health and morality of the white population. In contrast to the interwar repeal of most wartime security measures, the emergency wartime powers granted to police and magistrates to investigate and prosecute narcotics crimes increased in potency and were made permanent in British law.

A second focus of this research is the legal prosecution and public portrayals of the so-called 'Sabini Gang.' The Sabinis were a group of Jewish and Italian immigrants who were accused by the police of a broad spectrum of crimes ranging from illegal gambling to extortion, abduction, and murder. Like opium and cocaine traffickers, the Sabini Gang became a cause célèbre in British newspapers, and they were eventually translated into popular fiction by Graham Greene, one of Britain's foremost novelists. And, like black and Chinese narcotics dealers, the Sabinis were accused of breaking down the social and cultural boundaries that separated the East End of London from the West End. Although police, magistrates, and journalists all emphasized the ethnic character of the Sabinis, their crimes never generated the same level of racial antipathy and media sensationalism that minority offenders' did. The contrast between the legal treatment and media portrayal of narcotics crimes by black and Chinese residents and the treatment of the Sabinis' activities demonstrates that the legacy of wartime anxiety regarding the former was much more powerful and long-lived than that regarding the latter. This aspect of my current project also connects it with my earlier research into the role played by anti-Semitism in wartime London courtrooms.

I will conclude my current project with a discussion of the relationship between race, courtroom dialogue, reproductive rights, and portrayals of sexual immorality in the 1920s. I approach this subject through an examination of prosecutions against doctors and chemists for the illegal provision of birth control and through a comparison between two libel suits brought in London's Central Criminal Court. The first of these two suits was initiated in 1923 by Marie Stopes, Britain's leading advocate of birth control, against the editors of the Roman Catholic newspaper *The Universe*. The second was brought four years later by James Kitten, a black London café owner, against the editors of *John Bull*, a jingoistic broadsheet that was notorious for its lurid coverage of narcotics trials and other cases involving interracial contact.

As with the campaigns against Chinese and black narcotics dealers and against the Sabini Gang, the trials of birth-control purveyors and the Stopes and Kitten libel suits were deeply intertwined with official and popular concerns about British racial and national strength, public morality, and the role of law in regulating race and gender relations. The legal campaigns against birth control were related to those against narcotics and interracial contact by a common argument that women's morality and sexuality were the fulcrums of the nation's destiny, and that their inherent corruptibility made police and judicial intervention a moral and racial imperative. But the libel suits also demonstrate how, by the interwar period, representatives of marginalized groups in Britain could use trials as forums to contest racial and gender stereotypes before a public audience. Sensationalized court trials were thus a sword that could cut both ways, even if the vast majority of cases went poorly for those who transgressed the perceived boundaries of race or gender.

This research is being supported by the Fulbright-King's College London Scholar Award, and it is part of a broader project to assess, through an interdisciplinary perspective, the impact of race, gender, and nationalism on British law and its portrayals in cultural media from 1879-1930. This research will be incorporated into the final chapter of my second book manuscript, tentatively titled *'Armed with Sword and Scales': Law, Courts, and Culture in Modern Britain*. I began my exploration of these issues in my first book, *Race, Law, and 'The Chinese Puzzle' in Imperial Britain* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009). Through its extensive use of journalistic and literary sources in conjunction with legal records, I hope that *Sword and Scales* will offer a compelling narrative of British legal history and a new interdisciplinary model for studying law, policing, and the courts. Through my research presentations and conversations with judicial and police officials in London over the coming months, I also hope to inform the daily execution of law by offering useful insights into the underlying legal, cultural, and historical dynamics that have shaped the courts, their role in urban communities, and their relationship with popular media.