

Interview - Amal Abu-Bakare

Written by E-International Relations

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This interview is part of our Black History Month features and our continuing series of interviews with academics and practitioners at an early stage of their career. The interviews speak to the fundamental aims of Black History Month and discuss current research and projects, as well as advice for young scholars.

Amal Abu-Bakare is a Canadian doctoral student at Aberystwyth University, studying racialisation and counterterrorism in the context of International Relations Theory. She identifies as a Black Muslim Feminist scholar who is interested in postcolonial analyses of contemporary security affairs ongoing in the Global North, particularly in the area of transnational counterterrorism/counter-extremism practices and the politics of migration-security in the European Union. She has written for *E-International Relations* and *Media Diversified* and has recently been published in *International Politics Reviews*. Amal is also interested in social justice, art, and media projects that address the global complexities and intersections between race, gender, and religion. Amal frequently writes and comments on international politics on Twitter @nawalabu_72.

What (or who) promoted the most significant shifts in your thinking or encouraged you to pursue your area of research?

I was fortunate enough to have an amazing IR lecturer during my undergrad at Queen's University, who presented Edward Said as a significant pillar of postcolonialism. Not in a capacity of post-structural thought or English literary orientation, but in a manner that upheld Said's racialised positioning as being key knowledge for an empirical analysis of Middle Eastern regionalism and a counterweight to prevailing narratives of the post 9/11 era. As a result of their teaching, I entered my postgraduate education with an understanding that who you are as a person in relation to the world around you matters in relation to how international politics is performed, analysed, and experienced – that stuck with me. I was taught to be sceptical of scholarship which claimed political neutrality in its assessment of the Global South, particularly scholarship that did not address the significance of history and the telling of history from the vantage point of those who were subjected to, for instance, US foreign policy. It was very much a 'remember– lions do not have their own historians' kind of education, that I think I needed.

During my Master's at the University of Warwick, as I was being encouraged by my peers and teachers to pursue a PhD, events such as the political after-shock of the 2013 murder of Lee Rigby, and the 2014 Ottawa shooting at parliament that we had in Canada, made me think more about the importance of understanding political/racialised positioning when acts of counterterrorism occur at home – and whether this was a matter of the international. I began to think a lot about the relevance of colonialism and postcolonial arguments to domestic counterterrorism ongoing in the West, and more on the innately political/racialised nature of counterterrorism itself. The problem was that the discussions of race that I saw in every-day societal debates about Michael Adebolajo, Michael Adebowale, and Michael Zehaf-Bibeau; and the phenomenon of how British and Canadian Muslims more broadly – who were not of a 'race' – yet were subjected to what could only be called racist violence alongside being targeted by policy on the very soil of the Global North, did not make sense to me. Back then I had not yet heard of racialisation theory, but I was extremely interested in how Islamophobia and violence premised on the colour of your skin were connected. Around that time, my amazing former IR teacher, Nick Vaughan-Williams, gifted me with a copy of *Race and Racism in International Relations: Confronting the Global Colour Line* edited by Alexander Anievas, Nivi Manchanda, and

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Robbie Shilliam. This book was a game-changer and helped tie my thoughts together in a manner where I realised that I should study how logics of racialisation – the process of ascribing racial identities to social practices– structure counterterrorism approaches in the United Kingdom and Canada, my two homes. It was on this basis that I became interested in the imperial and racial nature of counterterrorism as an idea, history, practice, and political project. It is also on this basis that I came to read the work of Pan-African Sociologist William Edward Burghardt Du Bois, particularly his (1903) *Souls of Black Folk*, and to embrace his problem of the colour line as a key research agenda for studying racialisation and counterterrorism together as one complex IR problem.

How do the aims of Black History Month speak to the discipline of IR? What can we do to forge a more equal discipline?

I think the aims of Black History Month speak to the discipline of IR in how it serves as an annual reminder that the racialised and black experience of the teaching and explaining of international politics is still not ‘the norm’, although attention to these areas is regularly celebrated in the IR community. On the positive, I appreciate that during this time of year it becomes easier to discuss racial politics and to celebrate the contributions of black scholarship and culture in UK higher education settings. I appreciate that special avenues pop up where people feel more comfortable to consider and discuss institutional racism or even institutional whiteness – academics and admin at my university came together and held an institution-wide “Is our university too white?” workshop last year during this time, which was quite interesting to see. But what I would also love is for Black history to be seen as a crucial part of a wider UK history all year round – a consistently integral thread in the fabric of the telling of Britain’s story. In a similar vein, I also would love for postcolonial and anti-imperial approaches to the study of IR to be more consistently seen and presented as being an integral part of understanding past and present international affairs, not just as specialisms. There is more to be done than just decolonising the curriculum. For me, postcolonialism stands as a broad interdisciplinary arena of political examination and explanations of racialised violence, directly addressing the mentality of the European, of the Settler, of Whiteness, and how it reaffirms itself in today’s society. Black history and its global commemoration are directly tied to this arena, and in turn, to International Relations.

Regarding, what can be done to forge a more equal discipline... my first response to this question was to look for Jean-Paul Sartre’s well known (1961) preface to Fanon’s *Wretched of the Earth* where he writes “Europeans, you must open this book and enter into it”. Here, Sartre offers a scenario where a European observer comes upon Algerian peoples, speaking fearlessly amongst themselves about their political destiny, gathered comfortably around a fire that – as Sartre emphasizes – the European observer did not light. Here, Sartre encourages the reader to notice their own discomfort in coming to terms with this reckoning, and while this analogy might be unnecessarily deep, what I am trying to say is that for the discipline to become a more equal playing field, many IR scholars will have to become better acquainted with and more readily willing to experience discomfort in their pursuit of knowledge about the way the world is. Discomfort is a normal and necessary part of learning about the world around you. Scholars such as AbdouMaliq Simone have discussed this; how a vital task of the commitment to gaining a truly informed understanding of international politics is realising the immense significance of the ability to walk away from the world one has made and knows, so that other worlds can be seen and presented on their own terms. For a more equitable discipline, more actors of IR need to be ready to have their ways of thinking situated in conversations about oppressive power structures, about colonialism, whiteness, gender, religion, indigeneity, and sexuality. This will be an uncomfortable process, but it will encourage pedagogical circumstances where producing IR knowledge can more equitably occur through “the hermeneutics of the sufferers” rather than solely through “abstractions of the privileged” (Shilliam 2013:142).

Your PhD thesis looks at how logics of racialisation structure Western counterterror responses. Why is an understanding of counterterrorism as a ‘racialised discourse’ important, and what can it tell us about how to ‘counter terror’?

Counterterrorism finds itself entangled with racialisation in how it is applied to legitimise prevailing socioeconomic divisions between peoples living within the same security apparatus, and to uphold “racially configured exclusions, subjugation, and terror” (Goldberg 2002:38). Understanding counterterrorism as a ‘racialised discourse’ is important because it encourages the reader to be more critical of the historical and contemporary origins of policies and laws

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regarding what it means to experience political terror and what constitutes political and/or legitimate violence. Throughout the duration of my PhD, I have lost count of the number of academics and students who I have encountered who in this day and age, outside of the BLM movement and police brutality, do not understand that racism and racist violence, intentionally or not, are always political and always affect and/or implicate a wider political community. This is because the global history of colonialism and imperialism which defines our nation state apparatus, international institutions, economic structures, and most popular political cultures were structurally dependent on the existence of racial hierarchies that still inform our societies today. To deny that racial violence is political is to directly enable the subjugation of a people using what Bonilla-Silva and Zuberi (2008:17) title white logic, “a context in which white supremacy has defined the techniques and processes of reasoning about social facts”. By white supremacy, I mean the structural and hegemonic conditions of world politics which uphold white privilege: “the differential treatment and socio-political advantages accrued to white/European persons due to their assumed transparent competence and humanity” (Shilliam 2016: 293). Here, I am not referring to neo-Nazism or discussing actors who identify as ‘white supremacists’ but the more ordinary, low-key, and influential manner in which racial thinking prevails in IR and societies of former settler-colonies and imperial powers. As I use this language, it is important to note that when I say ‘white’ I am not referring solely to phenotype. I am describing the colour of a distinct social positioning and imperial/racial domination. Using the word ‘white’ is important, because as Vitalis (2015) reminds us, using a language of colour, interrupts any attempts to forget how the study of international relations has historically been performed normatively in relation to a racial hierarchy.

My research of British and Canadian counterterrorism found that the knowledge, history, science and experiences of elite white European men, structured not just what constituted political terror in the eyes of the state but also what did or did not constitute racism, Islamophobia, or legitimate anxieties concerning how counterterrorism policies and laws affected Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) peoples. Definitions of racism presented by those affected by Islamophobia (e.g. British Muslims) that conflicted with what, for instance in the UK, senior counterterrorism officers understood to be racism, were often disregarded. This is incredibly problematic. Those who experience racism know what constitutes racism best. Those who are most immediately affected by counterterrorism policies and legislation know what constitutes counterterrorism best. What this tells us about how *not* to counter terror, is that one should not assume a security, legal, or political posture that grants eternal objectivity to the views of elite whites and condemns the views of [those perceived to be] non-whites to perpetual subjectivity” (Bonilla-Silva and Zuberi 2008:17–18). Authors such as Sherene Razack (2004;2008; 2017) have been making this argument in the area of peacekeeping interventions, legal studies, and counterterrorism specific to Canadian politics for a long time. I provide examples of a number of other scholars in my publication titled *Counterterrorism and Race*, who also discuss counterterrorism as a racialised discourse in a manner that is pertinent to IR theorisation.

In your article, *Counterterrorism and Race*, you argue that an ongoing challenge concerns the reconciliation of popular state-endorsed understandings of race with more academic understandings of race. How are these understandings of race different and why is it important to reconcile them?

In the article, I mention that when given the chance to independently assess their relationship to anti-Muslim racism/Islamophobia, for example, more often than not, counterterrorism policymakers still predominantly present anti-racism as a moral or economic quandary disconnected from political institutions, colonial legacies, and wider dimensions of power. This is the popular state-endorsed understanding of race, one where problems of racial inequality are seen first and foremost as blatant intended occurrences of bigotry or fascism. A more academic understanding of race, in my view, has to address dimensions of power and how race is a social construct with ongoing systemic, empiric, and intellectual ramifications that are inherently political, attached to an ideology that is inherently violent. By inherently violent, I am discussing how race is the child of racism, a world system dependent on a belief in the existence of a hierarchy of livelihood, where some peoples are allegedly less deserving of life, being less human, than others. As Sayyid and Vakil (2017) correctly argue, in the case of anti-Muslim racism/Islamophobia, taking up popular state-endorsed understandings of race disallows race to be properly used as an analytical tool or conceptual framework for examining political conflict. This in-turn allows the concept of racism to become a ‘boo word’ thrown back and forth between opposing political actors with little or at times no recognition of the overarching context in which unequal social relations exist. As I also discuss in my article, misunderstanding the weight of race as a political concept, and discussing race in a non-academic manner, allows for bigger problems to occur. An example

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I provide is the misrepresentation of current trends in far-Right activity and populist activity specific to North America and Europe as being new, small-scale, ahistorical reactions to Daesh-Inspired extremism, when they are actually part of a wider political phenomenon extending back into the imperial histories of numerous Western states and the white socio-political identities these states once officially endorsed as being indigenous to their polities (see Perry and Scrivens 2018). To this day, different people being unequally subjected to counterterrorism procedures, is how everyday people come to realise racial hegemony and make colonial power known, it is how colonial power becomes written on our bodies (Razack 2008:136).

Is IR theory racist and if so, how can we move towards an anti-racist IR?

While the discipline of International Relations is grounded in a history inherently defined by white-centric colonial administration, I believe that the art of looking, thinking, and inquiring about the world around you is an epistemic project that has always belonged to everyone. It should therefore be made open and accessible to everyone in the intellectual, social, economic, and bureaucratic capacities, that would enable the necessary substantive equality of BAME scholarship in the IR community. This is an intellectual endeavour that would necessitate that IR departments do more than simply recognising the theoretical sameness and legitimacy of BAME scholarship. In order to have an anti-racist IR, more effort would need to be made by institutions of higher education to also address the barriers that prevent BAME scholars, particularly during this difficult time, from attaining scholastic opportunities and higher levels of recognition in the field.

What are you currently working on?

I have only just submitted my PhD in August of this year, so I am currently doing a lot of thumb twiddling and job and postdoc applications while I await my defence. However, since 2019, I have been working with Professor Anna Agathangelou of York University and Professor Christian Kaunert of the University of South Wales to fund a collaborative research project that examines how the problem of the colour line features in the supranational approaches by the European Union to the issue of EU migration-security in the trans-Mediterranean sea-ways. I also, fingers-crossed, hopefully have two more peer-reviewed publications on the way. For now, preparing for my viva during a global pandemic is my first priority.

What advice would you give to young scholars?

Believe in yourself and your project, especially if you design it. This is harder than it sounds – especially when you are an impressionable (as I was) young early career researcher and in a very competitive male-dominated field, and depending on your research area, not a very diverse field. The number of times I have been immediately referred to as Mr. Abu-Bakare in email and letter correspondence these past few years has been priceless. I might even miss it. Seek out an academic and career mentor early – having someone an email away who knows your value and worth, makes all the difference. Immerse yourself in what you are unfamiliar with. For instance, I attended a course on terrorism studies for 10 days straight, at Olympia Summer Academy, taught by renowned terrorism studies scholars who were disconnected from the postcolonial angle of my research, but who were still very encouraging of it. Taking the opportunity to test my doctoral research in a different disciplinary setting and before different audiences gave me the confidence I needed to write and defend my thesis before others. Look out for and take multiple opportunities to publicly share your work and get feedback from academics higher in rank (it is scary, but worth it), not just your peers. And for young scholars of colour like myself, Viet Thanh Nguyen, said it best: *Write as if you are the majority. Do not explain. Do not cater. Do not translate. Do not apologize.*