

BOOK REVIEW

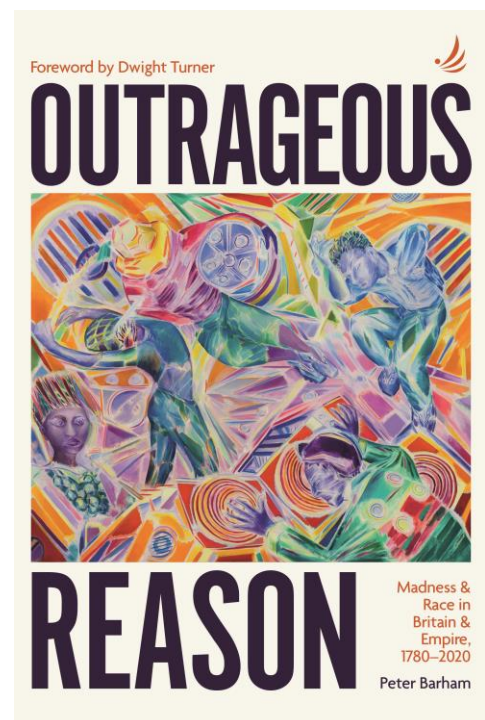
Outrageous Reason: Madness & Race in Britain & Empire, 1780–2020 by Peter Barham (PCCS Books, 2023)

Reviewed by **Kieran Mac Feely***

As a white, middle-class male, training in psychotherapy, I approached Barham's *Outrageous Reason* with trepidation, deconstructing as it does 'white' psychiatry's complicity in the subjugation of primarily black, brown, female, and working-class identities over 300 years of British colonialism. The book bears witness to the concept of 'race' being purposefully constructed, later embroiled with mental health, by a colonial class for both its own self-definition and self-preservation.

Artfully balancing historical and analytical rigour alongside extended conceits; skilfully weaving in first-person, forgotten narratives from history; a potent mix of thesis, imagery, and storytelling emerges to provoke and challenge. Indeed, 20 pages in, I was impelled to re-assess my own complicity, guilt, and vulnerability in equal parts as I discerned just how deeply racial thinking is embedded within the white psyche, and therefore of course, within my own psyche.

Ostensibly, the book connects a chain of colonial atrocities committed against minority groups over 300 years, giving powerful voice to historically silenced 'mental health system survivors' (p. 11). Perhaps more potent still, however, is how skilfully Barham exposes, beneath these events, a persistent 'defensive embattlement' of the white, British, middle-



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class imaginary; an existential need to subjugate any forms of difference, driven by primal fears and 'profound anxieties about the future of the (white) race' (p. 102).

Excavating 'the deep, unconscious structures of British common sense' (Hall, 1999, as cited in Barham, 2023, p. 152), Barham drills down to its foundations: to John Locke and Emmanuel Kant, two founding fathers largely responsible for the liberal democratic system still touted in Britain today. Clearly evidencing their equating of racial difference with 'mental deficiency', and how 'far from being dispensable, the mad person is integral to Locke's system' (p. 18), Barham builds from these foundations with well-reasoned argument, illustrating time and again how the colonial mind not only tolerates and permits 'othering'; but, in fact, depends on this very othering as an essential component to maintain a fragile self-perception of superiority.

Developing his theme, Barham outlines how the abolition of slavery in the early 1900s provoked deep anxieties within the colonial classes, engendering the need for new mechanisms by which to maintain the psychological status quo: enter psychiatry, the 'handmaiden of oppression' (p. 38). Indeed, Barham goes so far as to advocate that European colonisation 'invented psychiatry' to retain 'control of its delusional system' (Hickling, as cited in Barham, 2023, p. 38) following emancipation of its slaves. This theme of a shared fate between 'mad lives and black lives' (p. 1) recurs throughout the book and is difficult to counter, presented as we are with numerous, historical examples ranging from the 1700s through to modern Britain.

A powerful, indeed haunting, conceit running throughout the book concerns that of the 'Zong', a Jamaican slave ship which elicited scandal in 1781 by throwing its human 'sick cargo' of slaves overboard when they were deemed unfit for profit. Aside from drawing light on the atrocity itself, Barham utilises the enduring, metaphorical potency of the Zong (initially named the 'Zorg', meaning 'care', the name was accidentally transformed into 'Zong' due to a careless error), as emblematic of psychiatry's own transformation from care to care-less: the 'decline and degradation (of the Zorg) as a therapeutic institution' (p. 57) serving as an emotive re-enactment of colonial institutions that 'start notionally as a therapeutic environment, or an environment of care' only to be 'transformed into something else' (p. 57). By consistently rekindling this metaphor of the Zong—a relentless echo reverberating throughout his historical analysis—Barham articulately joins the dots, connecting a chain of 'psychiatric colonisation' designed to prevent subjects from any meaningful emancipation: from the Zong affair (1781), to the Kingston Lunatic Asylum (1860), to the Mental Deficiency Act (1913), on up to Jimmy Mubenga's 'Zong-like death' when being deported on a plane by G4S in 2013, to name but a few.

Two potential readerships spring to mind as obvious beneficiaries of Barham's work. Firstly, those akin to myself, perhaps relatively young in their exploration of intersectionality and systemic power dynamics. No doubt already aware of issues such as institutional racism,

this book introduces a 'next step', providing deeper scrutiny of the foundational building blocks upon which 'ideological Whiteness' is built. For me, the idea that racial othering is deliberately constructed as a means of self-definition, rather than by-product, leads to profound re-imaginings of my own responsibilities as a white, middle-class citizen, not to mention therapeutic practitioner. To borrow a much-maligned term, this book will benefit those wanting to get more 'woke'.

For more seasoned scholars, the book also provides a wealth of signposting for further study. Impeccably well-referenced and, at times, almost overwhelmingly quote-laden, Barham provides a myriad of opportunities for deeper dives. Whether it be examinations of a particular historical period; research into the judicial prejudices of modern Britain; or exploration of the foundations of psychiatry (including such curios as learning that psychiatrists were originally known as 'alienists'), there is a veritable wealth of information within these pages. Indeed, Barham himself describes his book as a 'provisional study that requires closer, and more exacting, scrutiny' (p. 200): his invitation is clear.

As a contribution to counselling and psychotherapy, this book invites us, nay impels us, to introspect profoundly on the biases embedded deeply within us; to critically examine our own positions as practitioners. Although focused on psychiatry as opposed to psychotherapy, nevertheless as a trainee within the humanist tradition (currently witnessing, for example, the rights of trans clients being redrawn by our own representative bodies), Barham's conclusions serve as a cautionary warning regarding the fragility of minority rights, even within the world of psychotherapy and counselling.

Similarly, most practitioners are likely aware how their respective modalities were born from the psyches of white men; men not dissimilar in privilege to those described within these pages. As such, Barham's work invites renewed energy in questioning the intrinsic assumptions embedded within our theoretical traditions. It has oft been noted, for example, how predominantly white and middle-class UK psychotherapy training classrooms can be, and this work cautions of the consequences when 'white male psychiatrists do not question their own cultural symptoms which allows them to distance themselves from the phenomenon they construct' (p. 206). An open and non-defensive reading of this book goes some way to reducing that distance, to loosening the bonds of this collectively constructed 'house of cards', acknowledging difficult truths, perhaps even those lying at the heart of our own practice.

REFERENCES

Barham, P. (2023). *Outrageous reason: Madness & race in Britain & empire, 1780–2020*. PCCS Books.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY



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