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# The constructions of anti-Black anxiety: Operation Trident's "as if" fictionalisms

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## Abstract

The Metropolitan Police's Operation Trident (1998–2012) was a key example of how Black criminalization was accentuated through the inferential narratives of the media. However, Operation Trident's independent use of the media would see them exhibit a varied practice of community policing as part of its broader preventative measures that would use a variety of visual mediums in its cross-media campaign strategy specifically aimed at London's Black urban communities as an intervention into what was perceived as the natural allure of gun violence within the city's Black symbolic locations. This article considers the modes through which Operation Trident attempted to structure public opinion. In conducting an underexamined analysis of Operation Trident, I apply the Neo-Kantianism of Vailhinger's "as if" philosophy to consider the means through which the Metropolitan Police's anti-Black gun crime initiative instituted anxiety as a Black criminological visual culture, and in doing so, secured its legitimacy.

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## Introduction

Operation Trident can be seen as a primary signifier of discorded Black male criminality within the public imaginary in early twenty-first century Britain. Launched by the Metropolitan Police as a policy intervention into the claimed phenomena of interracial Black gun crime that legitimized the armed (and fatal) policing of Black men, it also possessed spatial, geographic, visual and narrational dynamics. Operation Trident's lexicalizing of black-on-black drugs related gun murder employed a range of communicative strategies to craft the phenomena of Black intra-racial gang violence in Britain in the early 2000s as an unrepresented Black cultural crisis that displayed a reliance on the use of narrative to appeal to the existent anti-Black anxieties. The task of understanding its efficacy is one that can be approached through the ideas of the German philosopher Hans Vailhinger, who argues that in the effort to negotiate the various complexities of the world, humans consciously produce and subscribe to simplified explanations that offer an easier and more pragmatic way to comprehend and approach certain occurrences and

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ideas that would otherwise produce further complexity in our attempts to understand and solve them in their truthfulness. In other words, our actions are choreographed to chime with the conditions of their occurrence. Whilst Vailhinger's theory has been applied across the fields of philosophy, psychology and literary theory, it is particularly generative in analysing how popular understandings of Operation Trident were organized by the presence of mythological ideas that were conveyed through elements of fiction. The early 2000s were a period of contention within and amongst London's Black community over Operation Trident's anti-Black gun crime methodologies, the meanings produced by its portrayal of fatal Black criminality as a genetic deficit and the production and dispersal anxiety within the Black community as a means of securing its target demographic's consent for and engagement with its practices. Indeed, it is this interest in knowledge production that underpin some of the key analytical questions that concern this article. How was Operation Trident able to homogenize both Black masculine identity and the concerns of a subjugated Black community? And in this endeavour, what fictionalisms were created and resourced by Operation Trident the production of anti-Black visual and narrational anxiety? Operation Trident provides an apt exemplar of the mediatised entanglements present within a significant but underexamined vector of Black criminality in the early twenty-first century. However, my intention is not to disregard the reality and impact of fatal gun crimes the directive claimed to address, nor the sense of trepidation that met its closure in 2013. Rather, my intention is to explore how critical positions on the use of Black criminal alterity as Operation Trident's foundational principle was sequestered to the ossified technology of anti-Black policing, and the emotive Black response towards the devastating spate of murders in London's Black environments, both of which were to become aestheticized within Operation Trident's public information print media campaigns. As a result, this article both engages with and attempts to venture beyond what can be seen as a traditional theoretical reliance on the Gramscian hegemony as adapted by Stuart Hall et al. (1978) to expose the media practices active in the development of racialized moral panics, and the synthesis of a number of intellectual traditions remains present as a conceptual approach throughout this article's structure. First, I offer a critical reading of the Metropolitan Police's Operation Trident anti-Black gun crime initiative and an interrogation of the anti-Blackness in the very identification of Black criminal gangs that the Black gun violence discourse was, and indeed remains predicated on the forced alterity of internecine black-on-black phenomena. In attempting to both identify and interrogate the role of anti-Blackness in the production of public anxiety, I consider this through the introduction of the epistemological philosophies of Hans Vailhinger, specifically his Kantian influenced philosophy of "as if" fictionalism to examine the processes underpinning the efficacy of Operation Trident's public information campaigns. Finally, in arguing that Operation Trident's media campaigns are reflective of such "as if" aesthetic investments, I draw on this to conduct an analysis of Operation Trident's "Not Another Drop" and "Stop the Guns" print media campaigns" as two examples of how its fictionalism emerge as an aesthetic strategy of Black anxiety.

## **Operation trident**

For Black identities, the legacies of slavery have continued to persist and lacerate our contemporary episteme. The exploration of its varied manifestations has been placed at the forefront of the paradigm of the more recent conceptual iterations of Afro-Pessimism,

notably slavery's logic of the inferiority and non-humanness of Black people as the basis of present-day anti-Black violence, finds a generative application in an interrogation of the colonial histories that organize the Black existence(s) within Britain, particularly when engaging with the violence of institutions of state power and authority. This naturally draws us into a historicization of the question of Black identity and the associations made with violent criminality, given the fixity of the haunting myths of Black non-humanness, non-belonging, and savagery as the hegemonic premise for anti-Black crime and punishment, generally abetted the cultivation of a "moral panic" as argued by Hall et al. (1978), which remains firmly positioned as the essential framework for the inter-disciplinary theorizing of the stability of racism in the policing of Black identity in the UK. Relatedly, a similar intent is found in the subdiscipline of Black Criminology, advanced by Katheryn Russell (1992) to carve out an intellectual space outside the whiteness of dominant criminological thought and is present in the criminological work of Coretta Phillips (2023, 2020), Ben Bowling (2018), Bowling and Philips (2002), Phillips and Bowling (2003), and Williams et al. (2023), who has examined the over-representation of Black men in data on deaths in police custody, a carceral practice they term as a mode of "institutional killing" (250). Indeed, much of the critical scholarship on Black people's experiences of the criminal justice system centre anti-Black racism as its explanatory framework (Alexander 2008; Bhat-tacharyya et al. 2021; Elliot-Cooper 2021; Russell-Brown 2019). Notably, Valluvan (2020) identifies the reoccurring spectre of nationalism at the *structuring basis* of British law and order.

The above processes were all present within the logics of Operation Trident's anti-Black gun crime directive, and there is a particularly novel bidirectional narrative and aesthetic process to be observed in the launching of the Metropolitan Police's anti-black gun crime initiative, Operation Trident, launched in 1998 as a response to the mediatized phenomena of armed Black gang violence within London in the investigating of fatal and serious crimes committed with the use of firearms and where both the perpetrator(s) and victim(s) are Black (Bowling 2009). Indeed, we should note that the general description of Operation Trident as "community led" is in reference to both the fact that the initiative would actively seek the co-operation of residents within its targeted areas in investigating crimes, and that the directive was born in part from Black community leaders longstanding demand for more robust but culturally sensitive policing approaches to gun crime and criticism towards what was perceived as inaction and apathy by the Metropolitan Police towards the impact of gun violence within London's Black neighbourhoods, and such Black community leaders would later become part of the Trident Independent Advisory Group (Bowling 2009). Situated within the Metropolitan Police's Serious Crime Directorate, Operation Trident represented a crime prevention policy that secured an official legitimacy constructed upon the existent hegemony of "black-on-black" gun crime that had been developing throughout the late 1980s and 1990s upon the equally signifying phenomena of "Yardie-phobia" (Gilroy 2003). This is a term that functioned as a racialized shorthand for Jamaican Yardie criminal gangs whose alleged violent orchestration of drug activity within metropolitan areas of the UK in the 1990s was conceived as a consequence of both illegal immigration from Jamaica and the accompanying settlement in London, and a permeating murderous incubus within the organic cultures of Black masculinity (Nwonka 2023). However, beyond functioning as a policy response to serious gun crime and killings attributed to immigrant "Yardie" Black male criminal gangs, Operation Trident also expressed a concern over Black gun crime's rapid development as a "home

grown" affliction within the UK's inner-cities, an imperative that was glacially brought to within the mainstream of Operation Trident's activity. Just as we now observe in the contemporary crisis of county lines drugs criminality, where the punitive criminalization of at-risk Black youths are concealed within the discourse of safeguarding the vulnerable young as now foregrounded by the government (Koch, Williams, and Wroe 2023), the rhetorical concern with the protection of a younger generation of Black would-be armed gangs in itself served as the validating predicate for the armed policing of disproportionately Black locations within London, and subsequently, the subjecting of overwhelmingly Black men (young and old) to a city-wide policy of systemic suspicion and harassment as a pre-emptive policing policy. Operation Trident had initially been established in the boroughs of Lambeth and Brent before being expanded as a London-wide directive of racially-bound policing.

It is somewhat unsurprising that, given its status as a highly mediatized but generally inconspicuous Black policing technology that spanned the entire opening decade of the twenty-first century, Operation Trident as an anti-Black crime intervention is perhaps most citationally inscribed in the popular social imagination by the 2011 killing of Mark Duggan, the Black male shot dead by an Operation Trident armed support unit in Tottenham in 2011 that would catalyse that year's England Riots (Elliot-Cooper 2021). However, the devastating reality of police sanctioned Black male death was unable to disturb the ossified narrational orthodoxy of "black on black" gun violence that secured Operation Trident into the signifying field of Black criminality. One could argue that there is little differential between any of the official anti-Black crime directives in this field that would emerge after, such as the Black gangs' discourse that would justify the Trident Gang Crime Command, within which Operation Trident was later subsumed. However, what remains novel is its status as a directive that licenced the militaristic policing of Black men whilst simultaneously engaging in a seemingly more benevolent practice of community policing in the use of a branded, multi-modal advertising campaign, the latter displaying a heavy reliance on the creation of Black visual anxiety as an anti-crime intervention. Resultingly, Operation Trident was constituted by a range of bidirectionalities and registers a departure from the more linear but highly valuable analyses of the British criminal justice system's criminalization of Black cultural practices as justification for the violent policing of the sites of collective Black identity (Back 1996; Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies 1982; Gilroy 1987; Nwonka 2023; Solomons 1988). For example, we note a direct continuation of the targeting of Black visual culture for the official practice of Black male criminalization in the legal scholarship of Abenna Owusu-Bempah (2022), who pursues an analysis of the manifestation of anti-Black policing within the seamless admissibility of Grime, Drill and Rap music in criminal prosecutions. Here, the criminal justice system's insatiable desire to secure Black male convictions, particularly through joint enterprise cases, has expanded to its utilization of Black youth subcultural and vernacular creative practices and forms of cultural production as "bad character evidence" (427). However, what has remained generally absent is a rigorous intellectual consideration of the media texts that have been produced within an attempt to attend to and be consumed by Black citizens, whilst noting that such readings are present within the various analyses of Black popular culture (Gray 2005; Saha 2018). In other words, there is still much to be understood from the *specific* incorporating of Black criminal identity into the aesthetic and narrative logics of anti-Black crime campaigns and

the more complex laden media texts and narratives that attempt to assert a reciprocal relationship between Black people and the very media strategies that have historically been deployed to dehumanize the Black existence in Britain.

There were some critical perspectives on the purpose, legitimacy and racial specificity of Operation Trident's Black gun crime directive at the point of its launch (Murji 2002). Indeed, this article acknowledges that there has been some engagement with Operation Trident from a number of intellectual and political perspectives prior to and beyond the end of the directive in 2013, and more recently in a retrospective, neoconservative lamentation on the current "crises" of Black knife crime and a longing for a return for the anti-black-on-black initiative (Redgrave 2021). Operation Trident has also been the subject of citation reference within academic literature; notably as a form of transnational policing by Bowling (2009), and as a foundational technology of the fatal policing of Black citizens from which the contemporary moral crisis of "county lines" drugs and gang led criminality and its lead choreography of malevolent criminalized Blackness can be traced (Koch, Williams, and Wroe 2023; Wroe 2021). However, despite the reality of Operation Trident as a highly significant and contentious moment in the violent history of British policing of Black citizens, the directive has remained devoid of focused academic analysis, particularly in the context of its use of media not as an opportune outcome of media/police inferentiality *ala* Stuart Hall (2021) but as an overt communicative and aesthetic strategy (Nwonka 2023). It appeared that at its advent, the public outcries of a previously disregarded Black community served as sufficient rhetorical grounding for Metropolitan Police to present Operation Trident as "an initiative set up by the police in response to requests from the black community over concerns about gun crime" (Watson 2001). This bestowment, as we'll see, allows us to contend that black-on-black as a narrational anxiety is racially transcendental, an assertion that can be drawn from the local response to the reported killings that were occurring within Brent's Black communities following the launch of Operation Trident, for example, the Stonebridge Estate's "Not Another Drop" campaign which would be seen as a demonstration of residents' own concerns and fears towards the issue of gun crime from within the Black symbolic location. This being the case, in the resident's close proximity to both the crimes themselves and the negative consequences for the immediate community and its families, we find a different manifestation of social anxiety, one evoked from how the scourge of gun violence produces a landscape of ravaged Black lives and broken futures. Whereas for those outside the symbolic locations, anxiety results in the focalizing of what is really primal in the permeating fiction of black-on-black gun violence and the source of perennial unease, the Black body, and the discarding of any ancillary knowledge or factuality that can be discounted and filtered out of the communicative frame as inconsequential – namely contextual factors, untruths, implausibilities, injustices and the neglecting of counter-realities that are present, if severely reduced, within the episteme as competing under-narratives. This is a reading that should also find a place in the analysis of the meanings encoded in black-on-black criminality as a fictive narrative form. In drawing these affective elements together, what I am suggesting is that the permeation of the narrative of haunting black-on-black gun malevolence when packaged and telegraphed via Operation Trident's media campaign as necessary public information does not work to resolve anxiety, but to institute an equally spectral and haunting social climate of hyper-vigilance, aversivity, further social/racial segregation and the production of counterfactual prophecies that further criminalize entire Black

communities through the structuring power of totalizing grand narratives repeated *ad infinitum*.

## Of anxiety

It would be highly arduous to attempt to describe the degree of race fiction caught up in this entanglement or sustain an analysis of the racial discourses involved in the textual (re)representations of Black urban malevolence as a socio-cultural experience that can account for the complexity of this arrangement without a consideration of what is actually produced by the public encounter with the signifiers of black-on-black criminal fatality as a spectral practice. In the example of Operation Trident, we see that the official response to Black urban criminality adopts an ideological policing modality, with mainstream media positioned to perform a decisive function in the instituting of the black gang and gun crime consensus as a simple mode of Black existence. In other words, by the early 2000s, Operation Trident and the subsequent deepening racialization of crime by the Metropolitan Police effectively provided a litany of images to be superimposed onto the scrutinizing and spectacularizing frames of popular media as a matter of national concern, and the cumulative outcome of this superimposition, one that produces a captivating sphere of haunting identification and accompanying this, social anxiety. Both Freudian psychoanalysis (1991) and the narrative theories of Hans Vaihinger (1968 [1925]) offer some ways of understanding the ways in which anxiety, as the axis upon which external encounters with and our internal knowledge of Black urban otherness, become organized within some kind of narrational sequence. For Vaihinger, “As if” fictions are a kind of social narrative or trite that has been dispersed and pragmatically accepted as true despite evidence to the contrary, were our beliefs and behaviours are reconfigured to align with such fictions. In constructing a philosophy of knowledge that locates its genealogical pathway to the epistemological ideas of Immanuel Kant, specifically that human knowledge is limited to and inescapably determined by phenomena, Vaihinger asserts that fiction is at the basis of human nature, experience and comprehension, and as such, the vicissitudes of our being necessitates that we find recourse and solace in the intentional acceptance of what he defines as untrue “fictionalisms” (Vaihinger 1968). Here, we are compelled to produce, adhere to, and invest in the falsehood of explanatory fictions in order to navigate the uncertainties and seemingly illogical and contradictory occurrences of our existence, invoking human behaviour and action that responds to such fictionalism “as if” the falsehoods are indeed credible. Vaihinger’s “as if” fictionalism is a philosophy of how society accepts false and inaccurate public narratives to understand and navigate an illogical, complicated and contradictory social existence comprised of competing fictions and irreconcilable situations. However, Vaihinger stresses that the producing of simplified fictions is not a practice of subterfuge, nor is it a mode of scepticism, as there is little that is indeterminate in the position that such “as if” fictions take. Indeed, “as if” fictionalisms are inherently collaborative, for they rely upon the conscious rejection of logical contradictions and evident challenges to the veracity of such fictions. Further, the efficacy of “as if” fictionalism is in no way an immediate process but glacial, and requires a cultivating of political, social and cultural terrains to ensure such acceptances. Thus the “as if” fictionalism is comprised of both a concerted fictional construction, and upon its recipients, a pragmatic acquiescence. The fluidity of the idea that humans



proceed with untruth in the knowledge that they are as such to serve internal and external needs/functions, given the often-seamless presence of narrative as an everyday, organizing social practice, has allowed for the philosophy of “as if” fictionalism to be applied across range of disciplines, social situations and paradigms (Pollard 2010). Notably, “as if” fictionalism has been explored within questions of education and pedagogy by Dahlbeck (2022), who states “we make use of certain fictions because these can allow us to act in ways that appear intuitively appealing (and beneficial even), but that may not be entirely rational when scrutinized” (100).

I would like to draw attention to the second phase of this model; that the fallacy of such fictions can both be identified, and in this identification, some kind of challenge, address or reconfiguration of its “as if” fictionalism can be sustained. The efficacy of Vaihinger’s philosophy of “as if” fictionalism, whilst of course not formulated to account for the contingencies of racial difference, nor provides an obvious framework for the analysis of the correspondence between Blackness, anti-Blackness, and the production and dispersal of narrative anxiety, it does find its theoretical value when addressing the above causation dilemma. Given that Operation Trident was launched in the immediate wake of heightened media attention to the phenomena of internecine Black gun death, it is easy to observe how Operation Trident’s continuation of the myth of the Black men and violent crime predisposition to ossify the signifying forms of discorded Black masculinity was to be easily obfuscated in the consenting momentum of Operation Trident as an urgent social intervention. In other words, anxieties over Black gun culture as an urgent social danger were energized to allow for the crisis of Black gun crime to efface and resist scrutiny, despite any public opprobrium towards the internecine Black gun crime narratives that Operation Trident both produces and relies upon.

Just like the hauntological spectre, the analogies of social danger, threat and malevolence inscribed in the Black urban Other are reflective of a narrative structure and in this way, social anxiety is both a response to and in possession of narrative elements and sensibilities. But additionally, and as a way of exploring how the criminal Black Other is attractive to the logics of cultural production, the presence of social anxiety is also particularly conducive for the crafting of different kinds of fictional narrative forms, and I want to consider how social unease is engineered by the confluence of three affective and overlapping elements. First, narrational anxiety invokes a cognitive response within the audience that in concert with the Freudian proposition that anxiety is rooted in a tangible and external fear or unease, the mental process involved in the confrontation with anxiety-inducing narratives render such moments an engagement not just of knowledge production, but consolidation. Second, there is a physiological dimension that, with a particular emphasis on Vaihinger’s idea that the stimuli produced in our encounters with narratives of anxiety creates a series of “accessory structures” to make comprehensible such narratives and serves as an instrument to work through complexities of our daily situations and circumstances, in my adaptive analysis, Black criminality fictions stimulate a bodily reaction by the narrative positioning of fictitious Black abjectness at the centre of a regime of feeling, emotion and affect. Lastly, the production of anxiety and social unease that come to influence individual and societal action or behaviour; the ways that the interpellation of anxiety-inducing discourses on Black violence come to govern existing and future social relations.



My description of the central position of the narrativized Black Other in the production of anxiety may appear as procedural, systematic and overdetermined, but it would be remiss of this analysis to not attempt to conceive the relationship between the narratives of a criminalized Black urban masculinity and the production of anxiety as infrastructural given that the circulation of the idea of murderous Black urbanity within the national sphere is given institutional anchoring by Operation Trident's signifying of Black urban life, the Black Body and of Black death, which structures both the ontological and epistemological position of Black urbanity within the social and with it, the regimes of Black unease. Relatedly, the production and efficacy of our visual and narrational encounters with Black urban otherness as a useful fiction of race specifically, is equally populated by two additional constitutive elements. First, as observed in both the televisual and filmic depictions of the Black symbolic locations and the visual images of Black death, anxiety as a structuring feature of useful race fiction is achieved through the hauntological spectral of the Black body, and is found in what David Marriot details as "the blackness that haunts" (2007, 1) as a way for summarizing the embodied function of the fearful Black spectre as "the anxious glance back over the shoulder when you realize the stranger behind you is black; the fear reducing you to a child size when he comes near you, mobbing you like a legend or myth" (2007). Marriot's reading points to the centrality of whiteness to the presence of anti-Black anxiety, for at the moment of anxious confrontation, the limbic system narrativizes the Black body into a racialized set of behaviours and pathological expectancies drawn from the historic and existing hauntological spectres and causeless barbarisms of Blackness. Second, a spectre of anxiety is induced by the hyper-proliferation of detail in the form of the repeated and varied narratives of black-on-black gun crime. This is an element, like the former, that retains a hauntological dynamic in that it is the historic associations between race and crime that services the process of knowledge production through the repetitious dispersal of information, reportage and imagery on the issue of Black gang and gun murder.

This is as multi-modal practice, and one that is highly interdependent in its functions as it requires an interaction with other narratives and fictions already staked out and claimed as representative of our dominant and associative understandings of Black urbanity, and when supplemented with elements of excessivity, exaggeration and theatricality as the defining principles of narrative form social unease produces fertile social conditions for the useful fiction of race to capitalize on the existing spectre of Black sensationalism through popular accounts of Black-on-Black gun violence. I should expound on the particular accusation that is implied in the above use of the term causelessness, for the very affect of Black anxiety and social unease is secured through the mythic sustenance of the Black (non) being and fatal gun criminality as a criminal culture without structural cause nor rational explanation, rendering Black gun culture both *as* and *of* Black culture. In the narrating of London's gun crime crisis as the natural sequelae of Blackness to peculiarize and by extension sensationalize Black gun crime as a phenomena of non-human origin. At the conclusion of this communicative processes, little, if anything, remains for dominant society but to recourse to the historical pathologies of Black fatal and non-human discorded savagery that both reifies Black gun crime (and its fatalities) as the collateral outcome of and responsibility for Blackness, and legitimizes the seeming necessity of Operation Trident's rhetorical reliance on collaborative, intra-Black public information

media campaigns specifically (but not holistically) targeted towards the suppressed, diminished or/and absent moral consciousness of its imagined Black community.

To this end, Operation Trident can be understood as a fictive heuristic, bidirectional in that its pedagogical processes purport to attend to the proximal danger of Black gun crime within Black culture and the Black environment, and the moral outrage and fears of normal (white) society that the defilement of Britain by the phenomena of Black gun crime invokes. However, bidirectionality in no way suggests or produces equilibrium, and as sourced through Vailhinger, it is the position of a genetic Black fatal criminality as the central element within the Operation Trident official fictionalisms through which the Black existence is subject to the historical and unrelenting epistemic perusal that Marriot terms as the haunting Blackness (2007). This said, whilst Marriot seeks to establish visual culture's (re)signification of Black people as part of the persistent fetishist desires and reifying impulses that constitute our experience of modernity, there is an important, if slight departure in Operation Trident construction of a haunting Black narrative anxiety that is determined by the bidirectionality of Operation Trident's claimed public objectives; the highlighting and addressing of Black gun crime as a result of London's Black community but *for* and at the *request* of the Black community, the sourcing and encouraging of volunteered information on Black gun crimes from within the Black community, and its prevention through an appeal to the younger, impressionable generation of would-be-Black gun criminals. These allows us to nuance Dahlbeck's claim that Vailhinger "as if" fictionalisms allow us to "set up a practical framework for making sense of our experiences so as to temper debilitating psychological responses to our surroundings and to facilitate our actions" (2022:100). My challenge to the universality implied in Dahlbeck's thesis that is germane to Operation Trident's discourse of Black gun crime and its foundational imperative of anti-Blackness, is to question what cognitive debilitations (if any) are really tempered by such fictionalisms, and the exact actions facilitated by our psychological responses to such "as if" fictionalisms.

Given that Operation Trident develops the elements of its narrative fiction upon the crafting of a racially singular antagonist performing a racially specific crime within a racially homogenous physical environment, but does not necessarily assume or seek a homogenous reception for its fictionalisms, it is argued that as an outcome of the polysemicity of Operation Trident's narrative meanings and indexically, the multi-constitutionality of its audience, the affect of anxiety is tempered for some, but accentuated for others. Further, and returning to the primary assertion within Vailhinger's thesis, we find that it is particularly arduous for any counter-hegemonic position to be advanced from any excavating of Operation's Trident's Black gun-gang crisis narrative as a pragmatic untruth/incomplete truth, for even the revelation of the damaging untruthfulness of its fictionalisms on Black gun crime is met with a defence already encoded within its technology. This permits us to consider Operation Trident's visual outputs as a consequence of the postmodern, and in this conceptual endeavour, we find that the absence of absolute truth or an affirmative or normative axis upon which one can *sustain* an uncomplicated ethical critique of Operation Trident's Black gun crime gambit allowed for the pragmatism of Operation Trident's visual fictionalisms to place itself at the very marrow of Black subjectivity.

Operation Trident's description of Black gun crime/violence as an unprecedented and singular Black social crisis became the dominant evaluation of black-on-black gun culture in the lexical strategies of the Metropolitan Police and the accompanying inferential

media narratives that appeared to flourish in the de-emphasizing of economic and social inequality for a more palatable and policy-friendly set of culturally defunct racialized social relations. With this in mind, and retaining the understanding of the historical primacy of racism in the policing of Black people, one could not expect for Metropolitan Police's anti-Black gun crime technology to emerge in either narrative fiction or aesthetic as publicly cognizant or accommodating of the structural dimensions of the Black existence in Britain, of which I find were highly indicative of the Giddens's Third Way's structure and agency gambit (Giddens 1998). Resultingly, this article does not develop its taxonomic analysis of Operation Trident's public information campaign as an "as if" fictionalism upon the chimeric that Operation Trident should, and subsequently did not either narratively or aesthetically perform as responsive to the structural realities of gun/gang crime and absurdities of its figuration the Black male criminal. What I have identified as specifically generative in Vailhinger's Kantian philosophy is his disavowal of scepticism as the ontological basis for "as if" fictionalisms in favour of one that asserts that fictionalism's register upon the personal consciousness is a phenomenological process organized by a pragmatism. But to fully integrate the philosophy of fictionalism into this analytical frame, in how it strives to construct a narrative vision/version of reality as implied by Appiah's updating of fictionalism as a practice of idealization in which we readily acquiescence in its "useful untruths" (2017, 1) it is necessary to now pose questions that are not just embedded within the Vailhinger "as if" philosophy, but at its very forefront. What is particular about the fictive elements that constituted Operation Trident's official portraiture of Black gun crime and its attendant media campaigns that we find are both false in their claims and strategically productive in their epistemic circulation and acceptance and affective its subsequent dispersal across an episteme's collective psychology? Further, what are the aesthetic principles applied in the construction and experience of anxiety as an essential and inevitable emotive disorder within the social domain and what are the pragmatics such fictionalisms attempt to service?

First, despite Operation Trident's very *raison d'être* being the crisis of gun crimes where both perpetrator and victim are Black, over a quarter of such incidents that occurred within Brent between 2000 and 2004 involved perpetrators/victims of IC1 (white) description (Hales 2005). This reveals a much more multiracial reality than the Operation Trident black-on-black gun crime master narrative allowed. Second, the biological demarcation of Blackness from any other form of criminality, the media's holistic investment in inferential "good news" stories of Operation Trident's claimed influence on gun crime reduction statistics in London (BBC News, 22 January 2004) and the collapsing of its notions of a Black community with a single set of needs (anti-gun crime) an crucially, an assumed consensus over its methodology (Operation Trident) all contribute towards its fictionalism. Thus the racial homogeneity of Operation Trident's gun crime and the density of its Black portraiture usher the question of fictive Black anxiety into the realms of fictionalism, this being the wilful dispersal of its untruths for the purpose of securing public favour and community consent. Naturally, the media should be understood in this particular context as a heterogeneous and multi-faceted domain in that through its frames, the crisis of black-on-black violence is able to assist in the broader production of knowledge and the construction of the Black spectacle, and the dispersal of captivating narratives and imagery to cater to the use of the clamour of the criminal existences of the Black urban Other as a form of social awareness, advocacy and pedagogy, rendering the media as powerfully responsive to different agendas.

## Visual “as if” fictionalism

Throughout visual culture, we find that the Black body has been historically positioned as a source of social anxiety and unease, and the fixing of the Black being to the issue of criminality performs as a powerful mode of racial signification. Thus, from a phenomenological sense, the historical meanings inscribed in and the anxieties refracted from images of the Black physical form should be foregrounded in any effort to conduct an analysis of Operation Trident’s various media campaigns, particularly one that pursues an analysis by bringing into a conceptual synthesis Glynn’s narrative criminology (2021), Ferrell’s cultural criminology (1999), and the more salient Valhinger “as if” fictionalisms. However, Operation Trident as an official public intervention marks a qualitative departure from the other notable print campaigns that also occupied the public sphere as response to the politics of race in Britain from the early twenty-first century. Operation Black Vote (OBV), launched in 1996 as a predominantly Black voter registration campaign that, in a descriptive praxis that positions itself at the final vestiges of “political Blackness” as a cohesive term for the collective experience of non-whiteness, professes a reliance on an intra-parliamentary address to racial injustice through encouraging Britain’s Black citizens to address the Black deficit in democratic processes. In a noted 2015 print campaign commissioned by OBV, the advertising agency Saatchi and Saatchi produced a highly choreographed photographic-led campaign that forgoes the more orthodox use of Black photographic realism for image manipulation where a number of Black celebrities are pictured shoulder up, with the skin on their faces have been turned white, the image serving as a striking metaphor for the consequences of the Black electorate’s abstinence from local and general elections; this being the erasure of Black people from the full participation in British social, cultural and political life. Concurrently, the Commission for Racial Equality (CRE) pursued a much more visceral and direct mode of visual address in a print campaign that attempted to capture Britain’s climate of racial harassment and violence. Notably, a 1995 print campaign aimed to reconcile its audience with the shocking but diurnal experiences of racism, where in an advert titled “junk mail”, human excrement, dead rodents and petrol/flames are just some of the objects that are forced through the letterboxes of Black Britain that offer a microcosm of Black people’s experience of racial terror within their own homes.

However, the CRE’s print campaign strategy is one that also asked the audience to confront its hegemonic racial prejudices and anxieties. Accentuated by the aesthetics of noir, the partially lit but easily identifiable facial features of a Black man occupy the visual third of the 1999 poster “Scared”. Accentuating society’s anti-Black fear by its Black visual backdrop, at the poster’s centre is the word “Scared?” in large, bold red type, above the much smaller line of “you should be. He’s a dentist”. Here, the CRE plays on white society’s deep-seated anxiety towards Black masculinity communicated through a universal anxiety towards dental treatment, whilst in turn offering a post-multiculturalist demonstration of positive racial identification in the representation of a Black person in a highly respectable profession. For Operation Trident however, it’s “Not another Drop” campaign, launched in 2000, produces a version of anti-Black anxiety to attend to a perceived cultural deficit birthed and practiced from within the Black community. In examining one of the earliest Operation Trident print adverts, the text “Turn Away From Guns” is placed over an image of a Black woman pictured looking directly to us over her shoulder,

with the Operation Trident logo positioned as a tattoo on her upper arm. Whilst tempting, the image is not expressive of what Tina Campt has identified as “quiet images” (2017), these being the historical, archive images of Black people taken by official institutions during periods of Black fugitivity that can be repurposed and reimagined as a quotidian practice of colonial refusal. For Campt’s idea of quiet images, even in its most expansive and elastic theoretical interpretation and correspondingly, its conceptual application, is incommensurate with Operation Trident’s aesthetic of anti-Black anxiety that relegates interpretative depth for the hegemonic portraiture of Black gun murder.

The *Not Another Drop* print campaign comprised of characterizations that are facsimiled from a claimed symbiotic and symmetrical relationship between Black people and gun crime that may appeal to the popular imagination, but are certainly not conceptually or aesthetically *imaginative*. The poster strives not for an aesthetic realism, but for an entirely literal reading of its localized Black crisis. This may be the *closest* that Operation Trident’s textual/fictive oeuvre comes to Campt’s formulation, for its “as if” fictionalism renders the advert as in possession of exigencies that can neither be reappropriated, redeemed or rescued *ala* Campt from its function as a pragmatic “as if” fictionalism. However, the launch of *Stop the Guns* in 2004 and the involvement of the advertising agency Miles Calcraft Briginshaw Duffy saw a wider circulation through cross and trans-media approaches that produced both press media and outdoor elements. Indeed, a purview of the print adverts produced during this phase reveals a much more purposeful communicative strategy, aesthetic sophistication, and subsequently, intended meaning that in part recalls the mythological theories of Roland Barthes (1972). Both the hegemonic construction of Black fictive anxiety, and the descriptive language forms already claimed within the official black-on-black lexicon become unified as a fictive and aesthetic principle within Operation Trident’s fictive repertoire. But whilst Operation Trident was understood predominantly as a covert and inconspicuous police practice of information gathering, profile-based policing, surveillance and armed, fatal interception (as we found most viscerally in the case of Mark Duggan), in the case of the Operation Trident campaign “*Stop the Guns*”, the interventions are more conciliatory.

Notwithstanding the Operation Trident gun amnesties that were launched at the same period, *Stop the Guns* was solely concerned with the *general* sourcing of information from the Black community and the prevention of the uptake of armed criminality from an alleged burgeoning culture of young Black criminal understudies, emerging as primary a visual campaign that allowed for the convergence of a range of creative mediums. For example, we can observe its application in film where Operation Trident is present as an intertextual feature within the feature drama *Bullet Boy* (Dir Saul Dib, 2004), both within its diegesis in its story of the fatal consequences of a Black teenager’s failure to extricate himself from the cycle of gang/gun culture within Hackney’s “murder mile” throughout the period, and the inclusion of a *Stop the Guns* leaflet within the film’s DVD package (Figure 1) as the film’s extradiegetic, anti-black gun crime moral caution (Nwonka 2023). Given the racial phenomena of Black gun/knife crime and its forced synonymy with Black music forms (Bramwell 2015), *Stop the Guns* relied upon the influential sphere of Black cultural expression in the production of a music video in collaboration with the Grime collective Roll Deep. However, the Black density of its “as if” fictionalism is nuanced by Grime’s status as a racially convivial practice, and the subsequent output offers an account of gun culture that displays an ethnic and racial



**Figure 1.** Operation Trident 'RIP' Stop the Guns Campaign.

fluidity, although Blackness remains the axis upon which all its other narrative elements are adjoined. However, and somewhat paradoxically, whilst the campaign generally displays a performative immateriality in the use of the monolith of Black skin, Black death and the image of guns as Blackness's weapon of choice, conspicuous throughout Operation Trident's print media campaigns is the absence of the housing estate. This is particularly pertinent given that the towerblock is an image that has so historically performed as a powerful signifier for a raced and classed social Otherness (Forrest 2020; Nwonka 2017; Nwonka 2023).

Despite this, Operation Trident's *Stop the Guns* campaign can be seen as very much part of the broader *corpus* of Black urban visual culture. Given my identification of a



pragmatic fictionalism in its lexicalization of Black anxiety, I find that Operation Trident's Black/crime discourses, by natural extension, were condensed to within *Stop the Guns* visual grammar. In a 2006 *Stop the Guns* print poster, we see striking image of a Black male hand aiming a pistol at an unseen target, with a Black female hand placed over that of the perpetrators (Figure 2). The poster, as proscribed Hall (1997) possesses two distinct but corresponding meanings. From one perspective, the image suggests the female's complicity through silence, and on the other, she is seemingly preventing him from (easily) pulling the trigger, an action that implies that she (as others) should break through any racial, spatial and emotional loyalty in favour of a moral responsibility in the intervention in a culture of silence in the providing of information to Crimestoppers. Operation Trident released two versions of this print with differing orientations; a landscape version where the full form of the pistol and the hands of its two Black would-be murders, and a portrait version where the just silhouette of the gun is seen pointing directly at its audience, with the female hand still visible above his. The graphic violence implied in the print, interspersed with a subplot of morality challenged by Black gang culture, loyalty and malevolence, recalls the fragile "positive/negative strategy" of representation, in which Hall suggests the potency of the negative representation and its fixity in hegemonic imaginations render it both unable to be dislodged by the positive, but equally becomes the primary optic through which "meaning continues to be framed" (Hall 2001, 274). Indeed, it appeared that the negative aspects of Operation Trident's representational repertoire became the justifiable rationale for its production and circulation of Black gun crime "as if" fictionalism. Reminding ourselves that Metropolitan Police had stated that the decision to launch Operation Trident was not based on a continuation of a singular and orthodoxical practice of race-based policing, but on demands



**Figure 2.** Operation Trident 'Hide His Gun' Stop the Guns Campaign.



from within the Black community itself, this permitted Operation Trident to function (at least publicly) as an erudite response to alleged Black *cultural* needs.

There is a communicative struggle to be observed here and can be located within Operation Trident's "Not another Drop" campaign. In 2001, in collaboration with Brent Council, a poster campaign was launched, where the bold tagline of "Young, gifted and dead" is fixed above a shockingly visceral and homespun image of a dead Black man lying in a pool of blood, an image seemingly facsimiled from any of the mediatized imaginaries of black-on-black gun death (Figure 2). Further, the poster possessed a particularly localized cultural and generic verisimilitude, given that Brent had at the time one of the highest gun murder figures in Britain (Hales 2005). However, the posters were removed within two weeks of the campaign's launch, after up to 60 of the posters, dispersed around Brent, were covered with white paint by local residents in protest at its visage of Black gun death (Day 2001). This vandalism followed complaints from the families of victims of such gun crime, whose encounter with the posters, both in its aesthetic crudity and ethical neglect simply accentuated the distress and interracial anxiety felt by the families towards both the traumatic memory of the deceased family members recalled in the image and its armed and geographically situated Black male perpetrators still living amongst them. Here, despite the Metropolitan Police's imaginary of a common Black consciousness in their legitimizing invocation of "community pressure" (including the Trident Independent Advisory Group), any pragmatic investment by Brent's Black residents in Operation Trident's Anti-Black gun crime methodology was quickly superseded by both the poster's narrative fictionalism and visual mimesis. Within this struggle, the Operation Trident's media agenda creates the conditions for the hyper-conceiving of its public information campaign as an arena of cultural participation that explodes Stuart Hall's semi-taxonomic criteria for the application of the term Black culture that is seen as a bestowment commandeered by the racial composition of its creative authorship (2001).

However, despite my analytical interest in the questionable nature of Metropolitan Police's attempts to legitimize its racialized policing approaches in its homogenizing of the Black community positive response to Operation Trident's campaigns as a reliable metric for measuring the unit's success, such approaches were indeed supported by anecdotal and qualitative responses from sections of Black London who hailed the initiative as a scourge in the city's crisis of interracial gun crime. This was further augmented by its empirical outcomes, where Operation Trident was declared by the Metropolitan Police as early as 2004 to be a successful intervention, citing a nearly 50% decrease in fatalities investigated by the unit, and a 28% decrease in attempted murders investigated in this period (BBC News 2004). Such contingencies and bidirectional perspectives render Operation Trident as a distinctive and pragmatic visual sphere, and for my particular interest in *Stop the Guns*, the hegemonic imperatives of state authority and systemic structures emerge within the general orthodoxies of its fictive structure, upon which *Stop the Guns* is constructed, and pose a crucial challenge to the broader ambitions of the campaign to be even retrospectively situated in terms of a socio-political praxis; such statuses are, as observed in the analysis of *Stop the Guns*, externally driven, and are generally ascribed to the print texts by virtue of its Black constituents and the socio-political *context* of its making as it enters into a triangular relationship with the mainstream critical reception and media discourses that are compelled to position them as such.

## Conclusion

Vailheimer's "as if" fictionalism provides a novel critical approach that has proved accommodative of the polysemicity of Operation Trident's print media agenda, given the texts were a *source* of public information and bidirectionally, a method of *sourcing* public information. As argued, it is the singular construction of gun and gang violence as a Black affliction that undoubtedly informs the fictionalism of Operation Trident's public information print campaigns. However, the inverse of this analysis asks for a return to my earlier exploration of how visual and narrative practices are able to re-represent its most inferential and abject reifications of Black urban identity as a space for a renewed Black cultural recognition. As culturally remedial, Black British identities register a utopian investment in the images, vernaculars and narrative themes that construct the Black criminal text as syncretic in nature. In this figuration, whilst we may be able to conceive Operation Trident's media campaigns as secured by a linear relationship between the police, the text and the sense of terror, mourning and recognition from within a Black community, it retained a complex heterogeneity that situated the Black text at the center of a contested and pragmatic sphere of ownership; competing forms of custodianship structured by the imaginative fictionalism of the spectre of black-on-black gun crime, Black *cultural* identification, the post-multiculturalist sphere of civic participation in law and order. Operation Trident's *Not Another Drop/Stop the Guns* campaigns are constitutive not only of contested forms of Black cultural recognition or even Black creative and authorial contribution, but of a pragmatic fictionalism that enters into a fusion within both the textual themes and characterizations and the circulation of the Black criminal figure within a culture, social-political climate and narrative trend.

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