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# **Neocolonialism and the Global Prison in National Geographic's *Locked Up Abroad***

**Casey Ryan Kelly**

## **Abstract**

This essay examines the reformulation of colonial ideologies in National Geographic Channel's *Locked Up Abroad*, a documentary program that chronicles the narratives of Westerner travelers incarcerated in foreign nations. An analysis of *Locked Up Abroad* evinces neocolonialism in contemporary media culture, including: the historic association between dark-skin and savagery, the backwardness of the non-Western world, and the Western imperative to civilize it. The program's documentary techniques and framing devices sustain an Otherizing gaze toward non-Western societies, and its portrayals elide a critical analysis of colonialism in its present forms. I advocate for neocolonial criticism to trace how NatGeo remains haunted by its own history in support of America's civilizing mission.

**Keywords:** *Locked Up Abroad*, Neocolonialism, Prisons, National Geographic, Documentary Television

In 1996, James Miles and Paul Loseby were just two struggling working-class teenagers from Leicester, England. Struck by the allure of money and adventure, they agreed to traffic cocaine in exchange for a vacation to Venezuela. Their lives changed when they were arrested in the Caracas airport with 10 kilos of cocaine and a contrived tale of cartel thugs compelling them to traffic drugs at gunpoint. They were sentenced to 30 years in prison and forced to endure a brutal incarceration. After four years, however, Miles and Loseby successfully orchestrated a clever and daring escape while on prison work-release. They fled to England where they reunited with their families and resumed their lives in Leicester, albeit wiser for the experience. The story was recounted in the media as a heroic, though cautionary, tale of traveling abroad.<sup>1</sup> Their dramatic narrative—adventure, violence, capture, and escape in distant lands—is both captivating and familiar. While undoubtedly traumatic, historically such stories have been adapted as rationales for Western colonialism. For centuries, tales of white heroism and conquest in foreign lands have sustained misguided beliefs in the superiority of Western culture, the backwardness of non-Western societies, and the imperative to “civilize” the world. Volumes of colonialist literature recounted similarly harrowing tales of Western pilgrims, adventurers, and frontiersmen heroically escaping captivity at the hands of bloodthirsty “savages” (Engels & Goodale, 2009). At its time, the genre was well-suited to the civilizing mission of Western colonialism. As Hall (2003) observes, the captivity narrative was “synonymous with the demonstration of moral, social, and physical mastery of the colonizers over the colonized” (p. 91). While overt colonialism has faded, why does the captivity narrative retain widespread appeal? For instance, popular films such as *The Midnight Express* (1978), *Return to Paradise* (1998), and *Broke Down Palace* (1999) continue to depict sympathetic whites persevering against brutal captivity in foreign lands. On television, the National Geographic Channel (*NatGeo*) now catalogues “real life” captivity narratives (including Miles and Loseby's) in its feature program *Locked Up Abroad*. Part documentary and reenactment, *NatGeo*'s website explains that the program “tells first hand experiences of unsuspecting travelers who embarked on what they thought would be a vacation, only barely to make it home alive.” The program chronicles exceptional stories; however, like its antecedents, it presents the non-Western world through tropes of adventure, mystery, and violence. Here, the Western captivity narrative is refurbished and its dramatic elements amplified by the realism of modern film technique and framing devises.

I contend that the persistence of these captivity narratives evinces discursive remnants of colonialism in contemporary media culture. In this essay I argue that the captivity narratives presented in *Locked Up Abroad* advance a neocolonial rhetoric: discursively refashioned justifications for colonialism that suit present-day ideologies. A neocolonial critique of *Locked Up Abroad* excavates the latent traces of colonial ideology in contemporary popular culture: the association between dark skin and savagery, the backwardness of the non-Western world, and the imperative to civilize it. By adopting the perspective of subjects traumatized by their encounter with the Other, the program complements a neocolonialist view of the non-Western world. Although heavily mediated, its first-person documentary style presents personal captivity narratives as unmediated encounters with non-Western realities. This is significant in light of National Geographic's audience both lacking direct experience with non-Western culture and sharing a similar demographic with the program's subjects: “white, educated, and middle class” (Lutz & Collins, 1993). Here, I am guided by Ono's (2009) critique of media culture as a site at

which “repressed and masked” colonial histories reemerge (p. 2). I explain how the National Geographic Society itself is steeped in the history of America's civilizing mission and advocate for neocolonial criticism as a way of tracing how present-day representations are marred by a history of U.S. colonialism. Situating *Locked Up Abroad* in this context highlights how *NatGeo* continues to advance colonial ideologies. I analyze how the use of documentary techniques and narrative framing devices in *Locked Up Abroad* sustain an Otherizing gaze toward non-Western societies. I conclude that these portrayals elide the evolution of neocolonial discourses and their implications for how Western audiences view the globe.<sup>2</sup>

### ***National Geographic, Neocolonialism, and Media Culture***

The National Geographic Society (NGS) has played a substantive role in presenting images of foreign cultures for Western perusal (Todd, 2009). Founded by philanthropist Gardiner Greene Hubbard in 1888, its mission was to sponsor global scientific expeditions and provide geographical information to the public (Abramson, 1987). The group's first magazine contained technically oriented geographical research; however, following the 1890s boom in mass-circulated magazines, the publication evolved into a glossy coated monthly, complete with cutting-edge photography and stories from across the globe (Lutz & Collins, 1993). The magazine's unique mélange of education, science, and entertainment explains both its initial and ongoing mass appeal. Today, *National Geographic* reaches a worldwide audience of 40 million people. The magazine is omnipresent in U.S. schools, libraries, bookstores, and doctors' offices. The NGS provides support for nearly 8,000 scientific projects, expeditions, lectures, exhibits, and educational programs (Hoovers Inc., 2010). Members include explorers, scientists, diplomats, Congress persons, federal employees, and entrepreneurs (Schulden, 2001). Its burgeoning media empire includes a cable-television network that reaches 70 million households. *NatGeo* features educational programming on nature, exploration, culture, and political intrigue. They boast reaching “some of the most influential consumers in the world. As opinion leaders, they are affluent, well educated, and professional” (NGS, 2007). Like the magazine, programs such as *Taboo*, *Border Wars*, *Expedition Week*, *Great Expeditions*, and *Locked Up Abroad* feature encounters with non-Western cultures and narratives of adventure.

While providing education and entertainment, the NGS is deeply embedded in the late history of U.S. colonialism. The acquisition of new territories in the Philippines and Cuba following the Spanish–American War (1898) awakened public interest in foreign cultures and America's global responsibilities (Pauly, 1979; Rothenberg, 1994). Schulden (2001) explains that because of the Society's symbiotic relationship with the federal government, many of the same individuals who worked for the magazine were also the architects of the Spanish–American War and the post-war colonial administrations. Following the war, many NGS members agreed that America should shoulder the “White Man's burden” and fulfill its duty to protect and civilize primitive peoples. The NGS “published articles on the geographic and commercial possibilities of America's new possessions, discussed the benefits of colonialism, and assigned itself a role of arbitrator in determining the proper spelling of parts of the world, hitherto unknown or ignored, and now brought into view by colonialism” (Lutz & Collins, 1993, p. 18). The magazine's presentation style matched the vision of its colonial forebears. Bloom (1993) explains the utilization of photography

gave material presence to stories of so-called bizarre and primitive cultures. The photograph “possessed a universally effective revelatory essence” that offered “the ordinary reader total disclosure of the world and its mysteries” (p. 5). That is, the photographs purported to provide unmediated access to mysterious worlds. Moreover, photographs and stories of exotic encounters with primitive peoples conferred legitimacy on then-existing discourses of social Darwinism that positioned the West at the apex of civilization.

Today, *NatGeo* no longer offers straightforward endorsements of U.S. colonialism; however, it continues to cultivate an Otherizing gaze toward the non-Western world that bears a resemblance to historic discourses of colonialism. Anthropological critics note that, however well-intentioned, the gaze adopted by *National Geographic* constructs an imaginative space for non-Western peoples to occupy and organize “their existence in Western minds” (Lutz & Collins, 1993, p. 2). Said (1978) explains that the non-Western world is itself a construct of Western discourse, harnessed as a way of “dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it” (p. 3). Through an examination of the institution's history and programming, it is possible to locate a latent pattern of neocolonial logic. I use the word neocolonial here to distinguish between the classic form colonialism that is characterized by the appropriation of territory and the conquering of indigenous peoples, and what Shome (1996) says functions by “colonizing her or him discursively” (p. 42). Neocolonial rhetoric is representational though inferential, not an overt endorsement but a discourse symptomatic of repressed and unexamined colonial ideologies. Spivak (1991) likens neocolonialism to “radiation,” an ominous force that lingers but remains unseen, while Ono (2009) characterizes it as “a ghost-like presence” in our current media landscape (p. 222, p. 4). Selective amnesia concerning America's colonial past—the conquest of American Indians, African-American slavery, imperial wars, and Japanese internment—has produced a media culture teeming with repressed colonial logic, a “retooled, and therefore more relevant and effective, colonial discourse adapted to meet present-day conditions” (p. 2). Turning to neocolonialism highlights how television and film refashions colonial discourses to present-day imperatives. Some critics have identified such discourses to include depictions of foreign savagery, American exceptionalism, the “White Man's Burden,” the “clash of civilizations,” triumphant military conquest, stories of capture and escape in foreign lands, and the imperative to save brown women from brown men (Buescher & Ono, 1996; Cloud, 2004; Hall, 2003; Ono, 1997; Spivak, 1988; Stuckey & Murphy, 2001). This essay's analysis elucidates how many of these same discourses are tacitly endorsed in *Locked Up Abroad*.

Ono (2009) explains that “traces of colonialism have not, when totaled, served as a beacon call for scholars to perform critical analysis,” despite their haunting presence (p. 20). I suggest that the paucity of neocolonial criticism can be attributed to a desire to examine race and colonialism independently. Yet, as Hall (2003) observes, racism in popular culture is frequently “inferential,” manifest in oblique references to unquestioned racial assumptions inherited from centuries of racist ideology. Although its edge has been “blunted by time,” the racial Other as social problem is a representation bequeathed unto us by our colonial past (p. 91). Therefore, to investigate racism and representations is to study, even unwittingly, a masked colonial discourse. If representations of race and colonialism are implicitly linked, neocolonialism is rendered socially meaningful in and through representations of race (Hall, 1996). Put differently, neocolonial rhetoric profoundly

constrains how we understand race and racism in the present because it imports colonial logics from the past and adapts to fit twenty-first century imperatives. Situating *Locked Up Abroad* within the colonial history of *National Geographic* highlights important transformations in colonial logics from the magazine to television.

### **Colonial Traces in *Locked Up Abroad***

Before airing in the U.S. in 2007, *Locked Up Abroad* was produced for the U.K.'s Channel Five and premiered as *Banged Up Abroad* in 2006. The first season was rebroadcast in the U.S. as *Locked Up Abroad* and was followed by a second season in 2007, a third and fourth season in 2008, and a fifth in 2010 (*Locked Up Abroad*, 2010). In the U.S., the program averaged approximately half a million views by its fifth season, nearly double National Geographic's prime time average (*NatGeo*, 2010). The spike in ratings between adults 24 and 55 makes it one of the channel's most popular programs. The series airs in twenty-one countries, with the U.S. as its primary audience. Episodes are narrated in first-person with medium close-up shots of the individual(s) positioned in front of a dark backdrop. Reenacted footage of the events is displayed in addition to original footage of their arrest and incarceration. Although the interviewer is silent, the program provides internal summaries on-screen. Each episode begins with the interviewees explaining the circumstances that drove them to travel and the hardships that led them to crime. Switching between shots of the subjects and reenactments, the story builds to their dramatic capture and brutal incarceration. Next, the interviewees recount how their advocates were able to secure their release. Each episode concludes with a moment of reflection in which the subjects relay how they have changed their life since incarceration.

This analysis examines episodes aired between 2006 and 2009 (seasons 1 through 6). This covers 36 episodes, excluding 5 of which focused on kidnapping and abduction, released as *Kidnapped Abroad*. Twenty-one of the episodes focused on cases of drug trafficking and foreign prisons. These episodes form the basis of my analysis. I analyze these episodes to construct a narrative pattern and identify how *Locked Up Abroad* advances neocolonial depictions of non-Western peoples. Identifying recurrent themes, this analysis emphasizes how the program mediates, frames, and deploys the personal experiences of its subjects to craft a compelling dramatic narrative. I begin by examining the program's compositional elements followed by themes of Western victimhood, exceptionalism, and neoliberal citizenship.

### **Documentary Technique and “The Real”**

Part of the rhetorical power of *Locked Up Abroad* resides in its offer of unmediated access to “real life” experiences of trauma. The program's documentary interviews provide audiences with a vicarious experience of non-Western realities. Nichols (1991) explains that the persuasiveness of documentary is that it “invites us to take as true what subjects recount about something that happened even if we also see how more than one perspective is possible” (p. 21). Mixing documentary, docudrama, and reality television provides even greater access to the documentary subject's reality, particularly through interviews, observation, reenactments, raw footage, and textual narrativization (Corner, 2002; Murray, 2004). *Locked Up Abroad* uses a participatory style documentary that provides interviews and first-hand accounts as its primary evidence. Nichols

(2010) situates the participatory within the tradition of *cinema verite*: “the truth that arises specifically from the interaction of filmmakers and subject” (p. 119). The program even removes the observable elements of expository documentary, the “voice of God” narration that describes what audiences witness. Despite the vanishing narrator, the program provides text-based summaries that remind the audience of crucial points in the narrative. Therefore, the program implicitly relies on elements of expository documentary typically used in television news and journalism to provide continuity between images and narrative (Dow, 2004). Here, however, the participant becomes the “voice of God,” and the interview the program's main source of authority. The camera transforms into a second-hand witness to corroborate the story's authenticity. The advantage of blending genres is that it presents audiences with supposedly unmediated access to the subjects' “real” experiences. As subjective as their experience are, the expository techniques provide a sense “realism” and emphasize “the impression of objectivity and of well-established judgment” (Nichols, 1991, p. 35). Audiences are offered both the affect of unmediated personal experience and the objective realism of the authoritative expository voice. As a result, the singularity of one subjective experience stands in for “the real.”

*Locked Up Abroad* also utilizes the techniques of docudrama. Reenacted scenes allow the audience to visualize the subject's trauma. The visual recreation invites audiences vicariously to experience the thrill of foreign encounter and the despair of their capture and incarceration. Docudramas are typically based on real events, but might also take creative license to portray events how they might have happened (Lipkin, 2002). The blending of docudrama into documentary and reality based formats transforms the reenactments into visual confirmations of real experiences. The interviewee becomes the authoritative voice and the reenactment a mirror of past events. *Locked Up Abroad* blurs the line between a presentation of reality in something like raw footage and a representation of reality in the reenactment of past events. In Lipkin's words “the viewer is invited to accept the argument that re-creation warrants, that what we see might have ‘really’ happened in ‘much this way’” (2002, p. 5). The reenactments obscure how the program centers on the heavily mediated perspective of one individual. Even when the subjects do not describe the appearance and behavior of others, the reenactments supply portrayals inferred from the subject's narrative. The reenactments do not merely conform, but amplify, the subject's narrative by introducing dramatic elements, stark scenery, and threatening characters. The reenactments allow audiences to generalize beyond the subject to the dangerous experience of foreign encounter.

### **Western Victimhood**

Depictions of incarceration seldom invite empathy. *Locked Up Abroad* differs in providing humanized portrayals of Westerners incarcerated in foreign nations. Each program portrays the experiences of individuals who undergo horrific experiences at the hands of foreign drug traffickers, police, and inmates. The program emphasizes exceptional cases of individuals who are “out of place” in prison and away from home. Although they committed serious crimes, their behaviors are portrayed as youthful indiscretions. They are depicted as regretful about their transgressions and claim to have made major personal transformations since being released. The reenacted scenes are constructed from the subjects' personal recollections and their first-person narrations disclose their intimate thoughts and emotions. And, because the interview subjects are

marked by the trauma of their encounter with the Third World, their perspective is one-sided and unfortunately incomplete.

First, the show constructs an “out-of-place” narrative in which Westerners are hero/victims and non-Westerners are villains. Lia McCord's (season 3, episode 3) story is a case-in-point. According to the episode, McCord came from a background in which there was a strong expectation of attending college. She claims to have aspired to attend business school before facing unexpected financial hardships. Desperate and misguided, she couriers drugs from Bangladesh to Switzerland for a large sum of money. Her naïve plot is foiled when she is arrested in Bangladesh and sentenced to life in prison. McCord explains that she felt different from her fellow inmates; unlike them her transgression was a simple “mistake.” Here, the program separates her actions from her identity: “I was so good my whole life ... And now *I'm* going to jail.” In the reenactment of her prison entry, she glances nervously at dirty and sinister-looking inmates. Her voice-over declares, “I don't belong here.” In the context of the program, it is not only the experience of incarceration that incites dread; it is the foreignness and vulnerability that accompanies the totality of experience. Audiences can infer a double meaning: “here” demarcates both the space of the prison and the foreign nation.

The program edits down hours of interview footage and as a result presents a series of quotations that succinctly dramatize the subject's experience. When woven into the program's generic form, they construct a sympathetic narrative of Western privilege. For instance, an episode featuring Sandra Gregory (season 1, episode 2) foregrounds the privileges of Western citizenship. After presenting reenactments and footage of her death-sentence in Thailand for heroin-trafficking, Gregory recalls, “I'm British, this can't be happening to me.” Gregory's episode frames the privilege of citizenship in a Western nation as requiring exception to the laws of non-Western nations. Utilization of selected quotes from Gregory suggests to the audience that what is lamentable about her incarceration is the violation of her British entitlement. The episode to follow features another British citizen, Mark Knowles, whose story makes clear delineations between his British identity and that of his fellow inmates. Knowles was arrested for trafficking cocaine throughout Asia. He explains that “a lot of the guys there had been in boys' homes ... they'd been within that rigid system, that kind of institution environment and I hadn't.” Even as they confess their guilt to the camera, the program emphasizes aspects of their narrative that establish them as less sinister than foreign criminals convicted of the same crime. In short, the program emphasizes discourses of nationality to place the subjects beyond the jurisdiction of foreign courts. During each episode, the subjects remark that they were not the type of person who belongs in prison. Gregory even expresses that she believed she would simply be sent home with a warning. The selection of these discourses contributes to an overarching rhetoric of Western exceptionalism in which foreigners have no right to judge the program's subjects.

Next, the program emphasizes the subject's victimization at the hands of foreign criminals. Each episode features contextualized pleas of innocence in which the subjects suggest that they committed their crime in desperation. Although they admit culpability, the program provides space for them to explain the complexity of their motives. Within this context, the subjects become relatively sympathetic, particularly when contrasted against the portrayal of foreign criminals. The

reenactments amplify narratives of victimization by positioning the interview subjects as the drama's ostensibly naïve protagonists, taken advantage of by sinister antagonists. The portrayal of Miles and Loseby (season 2, episode 1) exemplifies how the program implicitly exonerates its subjects. When their case received media attention, they falsely told reporters that they were abducted by drugs traffickers. Miles notes feeling exploited and suggests that the two “were gullible children.” The reenactments depict the pair as meek, frail, and easily manipulated. Here, the program portrays the two with an appearance of child-like gullibility, transforming a moment of self-reflection into an appeal to the subjects’ innocence. Another example is presented in the narrative of Russell Thoresen (season 3, episode 2), who explains how drug dealers lured him to traffic cocaine from Peru by employing an attractive woman to convince him. While Thoresen explains that this is his personal speculation, the episode's reenactment simulates how such a scenario might have transpired. A nightmare vision shows the woman laughing at Thoresen, while being physically intimate with a drug trafficker depicted earlier in the episode. In both cases, the use of docudrama techniques enables the producers to present an image of the subjects as exploited, gullible, and innocent. Whether or not these individuals were taken advantage of, the appearance of exploitation makes them seem less criminally responsible. This privileged status is enjoyed by few inmates, who as a result of violence, racism, and poverty may also have a claim to have been exploited by others. Moreover, narratives of victimhood shift the blame to foreign criminals who remain mere caricatures in the program's reenactments. Without offering the perspectives of the antagonists or any explanation of other forces at work, the program's protagonists appear to be victims of irrational cruelty.

As such, the subjects’ tormentors assume the blame for their actions. They do not enjoy the privilege of back stories and rationales, a familiar pattern in popular culture that flattens the depictions of people of color to racial caricatures (Orbe, 2008; Stabile, 2006). The inexplicable brutality of foreigners is brought to life in frightful reenactments. In fact, the program selects stories set in the most violent prisons in the developing world, providing limited information about why the conditions are so deplorable. The audience is left with the traumatic experience of “innocent” victims brutalized by dark-skinned predators. The program's emphasis on excessive violence overshadows how structural causes might explain the behavior of their tormentors. Conditions such as overcrowding, underfunding, and poverty receive virtually no attention in the program. Therefore, the violence portrayed in the program appears sadistic and irrational. For example, in the episode featuring Miles and Loseby the reenacted scenes present familiar media images of dark-skinned predators engaging in acts of barbarism. As the two are depicted entering prison, they are stripped of their clothes, taunted by other inmates, and witness a series of brutal rapes and murders. The reenactment portrays hyperviolent inmates lunging through steel bars like caged animals. Loseby explains that “I've entered a Third World country that wasn't my country. I shouldn't have been there.” Miles comments that “you now live in their society ... where there are no morals” and laments “liv[ing] like a Venezuelan.” Their stories enable the program to attribute the awful conditions of the prison to the brutality of individual inmates. More importantly, the lawlessness of the prison is presented as a broader feature of Venezuelan society. Hence, prison stands in as the authentic experience of living “like a Venezuelan.” Donald MacNeil (season 1, episode 4), also imprisoned in Venezuela for cocaine trafficking, was incarcerated in a location where the inmates controlled the facility's daily functions. The program reenactment resembles a

war-zone: prisoners brandishing machetes and guns without any reaction from the guards. In both cases, the focus on inmate violence overshadows the fact that these conditions are a result of gross neglect. Since the subjects can only relay their intimate experience, a broader picture that might explain the prison conditions and distinguish those conditions from Venezuelan culture remains incomplete.

These selective depictions have implications for how audiences might view non-Western nations. First, these narratives replicate the class and racial disparities of the U.S. prison system (Mauer, 2006; Reiman, 1995). In these narratives, offenders who come from privilege deserve our sympathies because they are more affable and less-threatening when contrasted against their fellow inmates. The protagonists are predominantly white and in most cases the violent perpetrators are dark-skinned. The contrast between sympathetic Westerners and savage foreigners reinforces racist associations between prison and people of color. As evidenced by their thoughtful reflections about their experiences, the protagonists come to appreciate the significance of their actions and work toward rehabilitation. Foreigners, however, appear to be brutal beyond reform. While the protagonists are portrayed as the “out-of-place” victims, their fellow inmates blur into a faceless group of murderers and rapists eager to prey on young Westerners.

Second, viewed through the lens of incarceration, prison violence stands in for the general dangers of foreign encounter. The second-hand experience of exploitation provides a narrow portrayal from which audiences can draw conclusions about the risks of international travel. And, although these stories are exceptional, their repetition creates a patterned association between violence and non-Western nations. The complexity of foreign cultures is reduced to the site of incarceration, an experience characterized by acts of brutality. Prison violence is, however, a rampant problem in Western nations. Violent incarceration is not unique to developing nations; rather, it is a global problem that requires structural criticism. In total, the program's narrative reduces foreign nations to prisons in the most literal sense: confining, distant, lawless, and violent. Incarceration and its brutality becomes the defining characteristic of the non-Western world.

### **The U.S. Prison Model**

The “out-of-control” foreign prison gives the appearance that more tightly controlled, modernized prisons are the solution to abuse. Incarceration in the West is represented as a marker of law and order; whereas, the same practices in non-Western societies signify disorder and savagery. The major problem identified with foreign prisons is that they are archaic and outdated. Furthermore, because the protagonists justifiably deplored the conditions of their confinement, they express a belief that incarceration in Western prisons is more civilized. In many cases, the subjects express desires to receive a transfer to the U.S. or Britain. These earnest expressions help craft a narrative in which the experience of incarceration in Western nations is somehow more civilized.

In one case, Krista Barnes and Jennifer Davis (season 2, episode 2) note that their facility did not fit their preconceived notions of prison. Barnes explains that “I was just looking around going, ‘this doesn't look like a prison,’ this was like, dirty ... and there were clothes hanging out of the bars of the windows ... and it looked like a bomb shelter.” Note here the common assumption that prisons should to be clean, orderly, and disciplined. Thoreson also acknowledges that television

had primed his experience, that “the first thought that came to my mind was getting arrested ... you see on TV and in these movies, these Mexican prisons, just real dirty and violent and everything else.” Once incarcerated, he details how the prison was even more alien than he once thought. In fact, “it was like going back in time, like another planet.” Piers Hernu (season 2, episode 3), imprisoned in Nepal, comments that the police used “big rusty, very Third World handcuffs ... a very powerful symbolic act.” The court system under which he was tried did not resemble anything with which he was familiar. He questions: “if we were going to court I was expecting something that looked like a court, someone that looked like a judge”; however, “this [was] not a planet or legal system I am familiar with.” Gregory uses similar language to describe incarceration in Thailand, commenting that she was detained in “an old-fashioned gorilla cage.” Daniel van De Zande (season 4, episode 3) explains that, while imprisoned in Ecuador, “it was hard to convey ... that I wasn't wearing jumpsuits and that I wasn't being fed, and that I wasn't having any of the amenities that you expect to find in any sort of civilized prison.” These comments illustrate the disjointed logic of each narrative: prisons in the West are civilized, elsewhere they are uncivilized. Much of the evidence suggests that although Western prisons are industrialized, they are no less violent (Human Rights Watch, 2004). Moreover, the “amenities” of which the subjects speak are increasingly outdated under the privately run “no-frills” prison model (Tonry, 2006). These narratives construct Western prisons as the benchmark of law and order; a model that could civilize the developing world.

### **American Dreams and Neoliberal Realities**

Each episode ends with a moment of reflection that summarizes the moral lessons of their traumatic experience. None of the prisons in the program features rehabilitation, yet the subjects are portrayed as learning from their experience. Barnes and Davis's narrative is exemplary. The two served part of a six-year sentence in Peru's notorious Santa Monica de Chorrillos Prison, during which they appear to transform from “party girls” into responsible adults. The conclusion emphasizes the emotional development facilitated by incarceration. Barnes explains, “I think my experience in Peru was a wakeup call, that the drugs, with the money, prioritizing things in life, realizing what's important.” Upon returning home, Barnes graduates college with a degree in international development, an achievement she attributes to prison. Eight years later, the program documents her return to Santa Monica to visit and console her former cellmates. Concluding with scenes of Davis and Barnes reuniting on a beach, the two appear contemplative, mature, and reformed.

McCord's narrative also elaborates on this theme. Despite a disproportionate sentence, McCord contends that she attempted to make the best of incarceration. She learns Bengali and forges strong friendships with fellow inmates. Remarkably, several years into her sentence McCord received a Presidential pardon. McCord expresses no antipathy; instead, she is thankful:

People say when you go to jail you find your soul ... The biggest thing I got out of there was an understanding of myself, and of the world and an idea that there's so much more out there. It made me so much stronger and so much happier that I'm thankful for it. I wouldn't want to repeat it but I wouldn't necessarily change it either. There's no other way I'd be who I am, where I am, without it.

The episode concludes by informing the audience that McCord graduated from college and now works for N.A.S.A. Ultimately, she is portrayed as a model prisoner, using her sentence to reform and reintegrate into society. Like Barnes and Davis, McCord is held up as what all prisoners should be: productive members of society. The program highlights incarceration as the transformative moment in which these individuals are prompted to reform their behavior.

Barnes, Davis, and McCord are depicted as learning that crime is not a substitute for hard work. Similarly, Alex Silva (season 6, episode 2) notes feeling misguided by the perception that crime is a short-cut to success. Silva had dropped out of high school and was looking for “easy money.” He was employed as a part-time mechanic when he was lured by the glamour of drug trafficking. Imprisoned for smuggling marijuana in Mexico, Silva explains, “I hope that somebody sees my story and takes to heart what I've done, and sees that they become aware of that fake money, that's not there, that it's just a façade that's there, that doesn't actually exist, and changes their life and gets away from the drug world. If at least one person can do that I think that would be a big accomplishment.” Each story confirms that either failure or success hinges on individual choices, but failure is not a barrier to achieving success. A closer examination of these narratives reveals a discourse of American exceptionalism, sustained through a “boot-straps” narrative in which hard work empowers individuals to overcome significant challenges. The program's subjects are punished for their deviant behavior but then rewarded for their hard efforts to rehabilitate. This model of punishment is well-suited to the mythological structure of the American Dream in which protagonists overcome significant obstacles through an ethic of hard work, initiative, and self-reliance (Cloud, 1996; Hoerl, 2008; Winn, 2003). With an emphasis on personal choice and responsibility, these narratives are also consistent with the Western trend toward neoliberal citizenship. As Ouellette and Hay (2008) argue, documentary-style television is well-suited to translate changing political demands for a downsized public sector, great consumer choice, and heightened personal responsibility into expectations for citizenship. They argue that “the application of documentary techniques to the demonstration, performance, and testing of self and everyday life makes reality entertainment potentially useful to new strategies of ‘governing at a distance’ that deemphasize public oversight and require enterprising individuals to manage their own health, prosperity, and well being” (Ouellette, 2010, p. 68). Like the American Dream, neoliberal citizenship is predicated on replacing state functions with personal responsibility and free-market individualism. Ouellette emphasizes documentary techniques and reality formats as taking up neoliberal demands by providing programs of real people overcoming socio-economic challenges with personal initiative.

There are two important implications to the program's neoliberal portrayals. First, the emphasis on personal transformation diverts attention from the structural elements of global incarceration, including the unprecedented expansion of global incarceration that has accompanied the U.S. War on Drugs (Hartnett, 1995). Despite its vigorous prosecution across the globe, the Westerners featured in *Locked Up Abroad* are eventually granted the privilege of exception. By virtue of their citizenship and personal initiative, the program's subjects remain the few to be granted mercy for such considerably large transgressions. This privilege, however, is not afforded to their fellow inmates, who will inevitably pay the price for their crimes. As presented, structural advantages seem to play a role in neither these individual's success nor the failures of their fellow inmates.

This point is more striking when we examine the structural privileges that more accurately account for these individuals' success. For instance, McCord was released from prison on the behest of Texas Congress person Bill Richardson, who appealed to the President of Bangladesh to secure her release. And, after being fortunate enough to receive a pardon from the King of Thailand, Gregory's episode concludes with footage of her graduation from Oxford University. Overall, the show features exceptional individuals who are removed from the class and racial demographic that constitutes the global prison system. Silva is one of the only individuals featured on the program who is both Hispanic and from a lower-income background; however, even he ends up as a beneficiary of U.S. citizenship, which enabled him to be paroled early. Almost every story provides a hopeful resolution and the possibility of productive lives after incarceration. Scott White (season 3, episode 1), imprisoned in Kuwait for selling hashish, claims that prison was character-building: "I was born again in a way and I became a survivor ... I believe I am wiser for my experiences." Critics of the American Dream explain that the opportunity to overcome obstacles, correct mistakes, and succeed is not a matter of individual choice, but structural advantages derived from one's race, class, gender, and nationality.

Second, the endorsement of personal initiative advances an image of incarceration that does not require rehabilitation or social services. Without any state intervention, the program's subjects are portrayed as successfully reformed. They are ideal neoliberal citizens: they rehabilitate themselves. Most individuals released from prison across the globe have very limited opportunities for social advancement. Yet, narratives of perseverance attribute the post-incarceration success of these individuals to their careful reflection during incarceration. These individuals made the best use of their time in prison; yet, their citizenship and other structural privileges more accurately account for their success. And, if choices alone account for success, then those who remain in prison are to blame for their failures.

### **Neocolonial Media and its Legacies**

The documentary techniques and narrative devices employed in *Locked Up Abroad* construct a revised and updated colonial gaze. The NGS no longer provides alibi for US military conquest; however, its interface with foreign culture remains haunted by fears of foreign marauders, the presumptive superiority of Western democracy, and indelible qualities of Western individualism. This analysis demonstrates how contemporary television refurbishes tropes of Western colonialism as a familiar mode of dramatization. Critical rhetoric and media scholars might be well positioned to attend to how film and television recycles colonial narratives to address important social imperatives, paying particular attention to depictions of race and citizenship. Critics might bring to the surface the implied, repressed, and inferential colonial logics in media texts to trouble the ongoing association between dark-skin and savagery, the imperative to police non-Western nations, and adventurism in exotic lands. In this conclusion, I explore three implications of the neocolonial rhetoric endorsed in *Locked Up Abroad* and illustrate the need for neocolonial criticism.

First, the program's contrast between First World and Third World justice resurrects the belief that the West is the protector of global law and order. The program provides contrasting images of savages deserving of punishment and ostensibly innocent Westerners who "mistakenly" end up in

the same conditions. The Western prisoners are portrayed as civilized, thoughtfully translating their incarceration into major life transformations. The savage subjects remain rightfully incapacitated, left behind in the brutal conditions that the show highlights. The stories document the inhumanity of incarceration as an exclusively Third World problem. To this end, each episode adheres to ideological beliefs in the superiority of Western law. The West's prisons are presented as industrial, clean, and efficient; laws fair and just; courts impartial and uncorrupted. Non-Western law enforcement is barbaric, savage, and corrupt.

Second, *Locked Up Abroad* reproduces colonial narratives of adventure, danger, and intrigue in mysterious lands. In particular, *Locked Up Abroad* valorizes narratives of Westerners who—while scarred by their encounter with the savage Other—overcome great adversity by virtue of their moral character. This portrayal is homologous with tales of discovery in the New World, characterized by white heroism in conquering savage frontiers. Hall (2003) observes that inferential racism in media texts continually reference the racial assumptions derived from these ubiquitous colonial narratives. Ono (2009) elaborates on Hall's points, suggesting that media culture continues to recycle colonial narratives “such as the production and reproduction of stories about white men rescuing brown women from brown men; travel, tourist, and escape narratives about exploring strange lands and civilizations elsewhere” (p. 15). Depictions of adventure and treachery in strange lands update and reorganize the Third World as a conquerable frontier in the Western mind. As such, *Locked Up Abroad* affixes the colonial adventure, captivity, and escape narrative to modern times.

Third, *Locked Up Abroad's* construction of incarceration has implications for how audiences might understand the West's role in the maintenance of global law and order. Over the past 30 years, the U.S. prison population has skyrocketed from approximately 200,000 to 2.3 million by 2008 (Selman & Leighton, 2010). America incarcerates at a rate that far exceeds the rest of the globe (Raphael & Stoll, 2009). Globally, the U.S. prison industries have directly contributed to the expansion of incarceration in developing nations by offering modernized prisons as symbols of neoliberal development (Sudbury, 2005). Corrections Corporation of America and Wackenhut Corrections are fervent in their criticism of the abuse in foreign prisons. Sudbury (2005) argues that these discourses create a welcoming environment for private prison corporations to ostensibly commandeer the penal policies of developing nations. The prison industry thrives by isolating the failures of state-run programs and offering for-profit alternatives, “a panacea that will solve the problems of overcrowding, corruption, and horrendous conditions in overstretched, under-resourced penal systems” (Sudbury, 2004, p. 25). Private prisons, however, have exacerbated conditions, and claims of efficacy are indicted by documented cases of staff shortages, inadequate health care, rampant violence, and sexual abuse (Nathan, 2000). Nonetheless, privatized prisons are now under construction or being considered in Argentina, Peru, Mexico, Canada, Venezuela, South Africa, New Zealand, Australia, and the Netherlands Antilles. Additionally, U.S. efforts to modernize developing economies have emphasized law enforcement and mass incarceration at the expense of social services, education, transportation, and housing (Sudbury, 2004). As a result, developing nations have divested from social programs that might alleviate the need for more prisons. The omission of abuse in Western prisons and the role of Anglo-American corrections corporations in perpetuating mass incarceration place the blame on developing nations.

While neocolonialism has yet to register as a clarion call to critical media scholars, the lasting legacies of our colonial past will continue to confront us in increasingly allusive ways. To investigate representations of race, gender, capitalism, and empire is to peer into our repressed colonial histories. This analysis demonstrates that placing media texts in neocolonial contexts yields latent connections between media culture and the persistence of Western hegemony. When these connections are exposed, it becomes possible to disrupt seamless narratives of liberal progress in which colonialism is portrayed as a relic of a distant past. Critical scholars might disrupt the conventional wisdom that our past can be neatly segmented from present-day circumstances by explicating popular culture's unacknowledged citation of colonial discourses. A neocolonial approach enables critics to explain and challenge how media texts, such as the programs of *NatGeo*, reproduce the discourses historically-used in the service of empire.

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### Notes

1. A typical examples include Thompson ([2001](#)); Booth ([1999](#)); and McDonough ([1997](#)).
2. I use “Third World,” “non-Western,” and “developing world” provisionally to denote and critique colonial hierarchies within the existing global order.

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