Evan Hackstadt

Professor Lasley

ENGL 1A — CT&W I

6 December 2023

Justifications, Nuances, and Complications of Crime

The concepts of crime and criminality are key elements of today's societies. However, these categories are anything but objective. Trevor Noah's book *Born a Crime* provides commentary on the topic of crime, law, and justice (beyond just the title) from Trevor's own life experiences. The book contains a mix of humorous and serious stories from Trevor's childhood in South Africa, with special focus given to his mother and his personal experiences with apartheid. Ultimately, *Born a Crime* provides uniquely contextualized commentary on the biased definitions of crime, justification for and refutation of criminal acts, and crime's overall potential as a form of rebellion against oppressive systems.

In society, people are generally taught that crime is bad. Criminal acts are against the law, and performing them gets you in trouble (e.g. getting fined, going to jail, etc.). However, the very premise of Trevor Noah's book challenges this mindset. It's right there in the title — as Trevor says matter-of-factly, "The doctors took [my mother] up to the delivery room, cut open her belly, and reached in and pulled out a half-white, half-black child who violated any number of laws, statues, and regulations— I was born a crime" (26). This was due to the system of apartheid in South Africa at the time. Essentially, the government enforced race-based segregation (and subordination) in order to maintain white dominance over a native African majority. Under apartheid, "one of the worst crimes you could commit was having sexual relations with a person of another race" (21).

Immediately this reveals an important fact communicated by Trevor's story: criminality is determined by laws, and laws are generally controlled in some fashion by the government. But governments can be (and often are, I would argue) corrupt to some degree or at least not objectively/universally benevolent. Put another way, "crimes" are not always intrinsically morally wrong just because they are defined as so.

This opening is a solid message on crime, using the subject of Trevor himself as a catalyst. However, the book contains further stories on this topic. Through the many vignettes Trevor shares, he characterizes himself as a chaotic and, at times, naughty child. He's sure to point out that this rebellious nature didn't come from malevolence or ill-will; Trevor was merely curious and high energy. However, inevitably, Trevor would end up breaking the law in various forms. At younger ages, this was rarely consequential. However, as he got older, these acts became more intentional and unsupervised. One example is Trevor and his friend, Teddy, stealing alcohol-filled chocolates from the mall at night. This went largely unnoticed until one night, where the two boys were caught red-handed and chased by mall cops. Trevor escaped, but Teddy was caught, arrested, and expelled.

The story goes on to drive home a lesson about race, but it also yields a few small conclusions about crime. Firstly, there is arguably a significant differential between the severity of the crime and the magnitude of the experience/punishment. Secondly, Trevor experiences a rush from the rebellion of this act: "They chased and chased and we ran and ran, and it was *awesome*. The risk of getting caught was half the fun of being naughty, and now the chase was on. I was loving it" (155). Finally, although Trevor got off scott-free in the end, his friend Teddy didn't. He doesn't dive into it, but this is an early experience where an action's consequences end up being worse than expected — and they affect others, leaving an uncomfortable sense of guilt.

These are two opposing factors on rebellion: the emotional catharsis of it but also its potential danger to harm those around us.

This story is entertaining, but Trevor shares another experience that comments more directly on crime. This is nothing other than his infamous post-high school hustling with friends in "the hood" (Alexandra). Before even getting to the specifics, Trevor has this to say about the hood:

> One of the first things I learned in the hood is that there is a very fine line between civilian and criminal… There are degrees of it. It's everyone from the mom buying some food that fell off the back of a truck to feed her family, all the way up to the gangs selling military-grade weapons and hardware. The hood made me realize that crime succeeds because crime does the one thing the government doesn't do: crime cares. Crime is grassroots… Crime doesn't discriminate. (209)

These observations once again complicate traditional notions of crime and criminality. In this specific context — extreme poverty and wealth inequality, government subordination and slavery, etc. — crime is both a means of survival for some and also a way to hold up the community. Trevor articulates this well by describing how crime fills in the government's deficiencies, painting crime in a positive light amidst a backdrop of evil government-based oppression.

With this premise established, the story goes on to describe a key element of the 6-person hustling operation: Trevor's pirated CD business. Immediately, Trevor shares another reflection: "That in itself was a crime, and today I feel like I owe all these artists money… but by hood standards it didn't even qualify as illegal. At the time it never occurred to any of us that we were doing anything wrong…" (209). Once again, Trevor complexifies crime as something subjective

and relational rather than some absolute moral truth. Expanding on this, he says, “It’s easy to be judgmental about crime when you live in a world wealthy enough to be removed from it. But the hood taught me that everyone has different notions of right and wrong, different definitions of what constitutes crime…” (212-213). A poor mother will buy stolen Corn Flakes to feed her family, not to intentionally aid a criminal (213). He even shares how his law-abiding mother once bought likely-stolen burger patties without giving it a second thought.

Trevor goes on to describe the details of their hustling: selling pirated CDs, flipping DVDs, TVs, or sneakers, giving loans, getting discounts, exploiting social standings and relationships, even DJing parties. He shares another then-justification of criminality: insurance. “And that was as far as we ever thought about it: When white people lose stuff they get money, just another nice perk of being white” (212). Trevor also upends stereotypes of crime-ridden communities by explaining that “The hood has a wonderful sense of community to it as well… People take care of one another… you have to share. You can’t get rich on your own… The township polices itself as well” (218-219).

I’d like to briefly bring in Sara Ahmed’s work *Recognising Strangers* to provide a supporting position. Ahmed explores discrimination in communities through the example of neighborhood watches. Her analysis is not directly focused on crime, but is adjacent to it. “The imaginary community of the neighborhood hence requires enforcement through Law” (Ahmed 26). She goes on to expose how this structure is discriminatory to minorities (by targeting and excluding them) and harmful to women (by ignoring real danger within communities). The takeaway, then, is that the Law can be intentionally discriminatory, and thus once again, what constitutes a “crime” (against the Law) is not always wrong. In fact, like Trevor, sometimes a person’s mere existence within a space — an absolute right — is itself a “crime.”

Returning to Trevor's experience in the hood, we find it provides compelling evidence of how crime can function, in certain contexts, in a morally acceptable manner. However, he does conclude with a key counterpoint. On one occasion, deep into this business, Trevor's group bought a camera from a contact at the airport. Upon investigation, Trevor found that it was full of a white family's vacation pictures. He shares these reflections.

> The other things we'd bought had never mattered to me… But this camera had a face… I thought, *I haven't stolen a camera. I've stolen someone's memories. I've stolen part of someone's life*... in two years of hustling I never once thought of it as a crime… *It's just stuff people found. White people have insurance.* Whatever rationalization was handy… We live in a world where we don't see the ramifications of what we do to others, because we don't live with them… I never sold the camera. That camera made me confront the fact that there were people on the other end of this thing I was doing, and what I was doing was wrong. (221-222)

These statements add a mature and nuanced complexity to the book's commentary on crime. Often, there is an element of external harm to criminal acts that we perform. It may be minimal, or it may be hidden, but it exists. When this external harm to others is acknowledged, the justifications for crime are immediately complicated by our emotions and our morals. Because of this, Trevor eventually condemned his actions as wrong.

Overall, *Born a Crime* provides three main conclusions on the nature of crime and criminality. Firstly, crimes do not immediately constitute absolute moral wrongs. The fact that Trevor's existence — taken as an absolute right held by all — was criminal, plus the fact that the definitions of crime stem from human-run governments, demonstrate that we must think critically about laws and crimes instead of using them as automatic moral markers. Secondly, the

cruel and brutal structure of apartheid described in Trevor's upbringing supports the notion that crime and rebellion against the law can be justified — and perhaps even useful for disrupting oppressive systems. Thirdly, the work complicates crime by reminding us to listen to our emotions and morals and be conscious of its effects on other people. From the third word in its title to its final pages, *Born a Crime* provides thoughtful commentary and nontraditional notions of crime that apply — and should be applied — beyond South African apartheid.

Works Cited

1. Ahmed, Sara. *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-coloniality.* United Kingdom, Routledge, 2000.