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Philip McLaren and the Indigenous-Australian Crime Novel

Cornelis Martin Renes
University of Barcelona
mrenes@ub.edu

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Abstract: This paper locates the postcolonial crime novel as a space for disenfranchised groups to write back to the marginalisation inherent in the process of colonisation, and explores the example of Australia. From its inception in the mid-19th century, Australian crime fiction reflected upon the challenging harshness and otherness of the Australian experience for the free and convict settler, expelled from the metropole. It created a series of popular subgenres derived from the *convict narrative* proper, while more 'standard' modes of crime fiction, popularised in and through British and American crime fiction, were late to develop. Whereas Australian crime fiction has given expression to the white experience of the continent in manifold ways, up until recently it made no room for Indigenous voices – with the exception of the classic Inspector Napoleon Bonaparte series written by the prolific Arthur Upfield in the first half of the 20th century. For the longest time, this absence reflected the dispossession, dispersal and disenfranchisement of the colonised Indigenous peoples at large; there were neither Aboriginal voices nor Aboriginal authors, which made the textual space of the Australian crime novel a discursive *terra nullius*. This paper will look at the only Indigenous-Australian author to date with a substantial body of work in crime fiction, Philip McLaren, and elucidate how his four crime novels break new ground in Australian crime fiction by embedding themselves within a political framework of Aboriginal resilience and resistance to neo/colonialism. Written as of the 1990s, McLaren's oeuvre is eclectic in that it does not respond to traditional formats of Australian crime fiction, shifts between generic subtypes and makes incursions into other genres. The paper concludes that McLaren's oeuvre has not been conceived of as the work of a crime writer *per se*, but rather that its form and content are deeply informed by the racist violence and oppression that still affects Indigenous-Australian society today, the expression of which the crime novel is particularly well geared to.

Key words: Indigenous-Australian literature; crime novel, postcolonialism, Philip McLaren

Introduction: Australian Indigeneity and the post/colonial crime novel

The popular subgenre of the crime novel can be located as a literary formation rewritten by once-disenfranchised groups. In the case of the post/colonial encounter, which operates along the axes of class as well as gender and race, this has led to the margins of Empire writing back critically to its Metropolitan centre as Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin famously argue in their ground-breaking 1989 study. Looking back at Empire through the lens of crime fiction may be particularly instructive: Michel Foucault points out in *Discipline and Punish. The Birth of the Prison* that it is precisely the margins of society that display what is essential to that very society's making. It is not what is included but what is excluded from 'normality' that is most instructive of the social fabric, so that crime fiction's investigation of violence and its control through the imposition of the law on the colonial and postcolonial contexts reveal a society's structure and operation. The narrative possibilities range from merely a conservative confirmation of the powers that be – and so the maintenance of the status quo – to a subversion of social, economic and political unfairness and injustice. The penal origins of mainstream Australian society have contributed to the production of what Stephen Knight describes as “teeming shelves of ... crime fiction” (1997: 56) and turned the post/colonial crime novel into a successful genre. Its commercial viability has, in turn, attracted practitioners of other genres to make incursions into crime fiction as major Australian novelist Peter Carey's *True History of the Kelly Gang* (2001) may attest. While it has proven an apt channel to express the post/colonial tensions in Australian society for white settlers, little crime fiction has been written from the Aboriginal point of view, and one may wonder why. The following will give an overview of Australian crime fiction since its origins, and trace how its general characteristics and peculiarities are expressed in, and defied by, the literary work of Australia's most well-known Indigenous crime-fiction author, Philip McLaren.

Crime fiction in Australia: origins, development and types

In *Dark Side of the Dream*, Hodge and Mishra argue that the convict status of many early Australian settlers as well as the stark natural environment, which many Europeans experienced as hostile, informed the settler psyche from the very beginnings of colonisation (1990: 25-30). Far away from Europe and America, penal and very different in nature and culture, the continent has provided a rich and fertile ground for mystery, crime and violence which writers reflect in often idiosyncratic ways (Knight 1997: 8). The first crime novels do not necessarily concentrate on the murder mystery and its resolution, which is a modern development, but address the harsh living conditions and concomitant violence with which Australia's early white settlers were confronted. Thus, Stephen Knight identifies a series of subgenres flowing from the 19th c. *convict narrative* proper, which was developed by such authors as Henry Savery (*Quintus Servinton*, 1831), John Lang (*Frederick Charles Howard*, 1842), Caroline Leaky (*The Broad Arrow*, 1859), and Marcus Clarke (*For the Term of his Natural Life*, 1882). A first subtype, the *goldfields mystery*, depicts the vicissitudes of the digger experience during the gold rushes in Victoria in the mid-nineteenth century, and it took shape in the writings of William Burrows (*Adventures of a Mounted Trooper*, 1859), Mary Fortune (“The Dead Witness—or the Bush Waterhole”, 1866), Charles de Boos (*Mark Brown's Wife*, 1871), and Randolph Bedford (*Billy Pagan, Mining Engineer*, 1911) among others. Another generic strand is the *squatter thriller*, which focused on the new land-owning class

and its hunger for possession and property, and was written by the likes of Charles Rowcroft (*Tales of the Colonies, or The Adventures of an Emigrant*, 1843), Henry Kingsley (*The Recollections of Geoffrey Hamlyn*, 1859), Barbara Baynton ("The Chosen Vessel", 1896), Ellen Davitt (*Force and Fraud*, 1865), William Howitt (*Talangetta: The Squatter's Home*, 1857), and David Hennessey (*The Caves of Shend*, 1915). A last subtype is the popular *criminal saga*, which celebrates the white bushranger as the national prototype as well as the criminal as a hero, while refusing identification with, and faith in, the colonial authorities; criminal sagas were written by Herbert de Hamel (*Many Thanks Ben Hasset: An Australian Detective Story*, 1915), Arthur Gask (*The Red Paste Murders*, 1925), Alfred E. Clarke (*Tommie the Growler*, 1929) and Judah Waten (e.g. *Shares in Murder*, 1957), and in recent times by Ray Mooney (*A Green Light*, 1988), Lance Peters (e.g. *The Dirty Half-Mile*, 1981), Garry Disher (the Wyatt series), and John Carroll (the Don Bartholomew series). A contemporary genre such as the *private eye thriller* is the domain of Peter Temple (the Jack Irish series), Peter Corris (the Luke Dunlop series), Shane Maloney (the Murray Whelan series), Ian Hamilton (the Pete Heyssen series), Marele Day (the Claudia Valentine series), and Kerry Greenwood (the Lady Phryne Fisher series), whereas the *society clue puzzle* written by Jean Spender (*The Charge is Murder*, 1933) and Margot Neville (the Grogan and Manning series) among others, only came into vogue on the wave of 20th c. urban development and mostly foreign, American influence (1997: 10-44).

In terms of mode, Australian crime writers have often resorted to *zero-setting* fiction, meaning that the narrative's setting or location has universal rather than specifically local, Australian characteristics. Zero-setting results from the marketing requirements of the powerful British overseas market; the inhospitable character of the Australian land (Barnes 1986: 600-1); and the need for white settlers to disacknowledge Indigenous ownership of the land and so gloss over the illegitimate act of the continent's occupation (Knight 1997: 157). Australian crime writers have also generated a considerable amount of *zero-detection* fiction, in which the central character of the detective/investigator is absent. This peculiarity can be brought back to a natural suspicion and rejection of the civil authorities, as well as a firm belief in the corrupt character of the police force (Knight 1997: 128). Thus, the internationally popular detective-inspector following police procedural as well as the private eye using less conventional detecting strategies in their urban locations did not become central features until the 1980s, when the Sydney-set detective novels written by the "godfather of Australian crime fiction", Peter Corris, gained popularity (Gelder & Salzman 2009: 144-46).

Australian crime fiction has addressed the issue of violence in the post/colonial situation almost exclusively from the standpoint of the white settler. It has perhaps been the Australian genre *par excellence* to comment on, and come to terms with, the convict past and the hardship imposed by the harshness of the land itself, the lawlessness of colonial society in the outback and the imported British hierarchy imposed upon the continent's urban centres. Yet it has also traditionally glossed over the crime of white invasion and colonisation. The myth of the continent's 'benign settlement' created a welcome levelling of class as expressed in the figure of the white bush ranger and the settler culture of male mateship, but it also meant the dispossession, displacement and killing of the First Nations and the overall exclusion of Aboriginal voices from Australian fiction into a textual *terra nullius* of sorts.

The first writer who attempted to introduce an Indigenous point of view in crime fiction was the mainstream author Arthur Upfield, who was born in Britain in 1890, migrated to Australia in 1911, and spent many years in the outback. He created a detective of mixed descent as the

main character of an early mid-20th c. crime novel series whose Aboriginal tracking skills, or what John and Marie Ramsland call his “innate abilities, intelligence and close examination of the landscape” (2012: 101), are of capital importance in solving crimes in the bush. Whereas Australian readership was not ready yet for a more empowering characterisation of Indigeneity than that portrayed by Upfield, the series became a huge success in the USA in the mid-twentieth century, and its author the “first foreign writer to be admitted to the prestigious Mystery Writers Guild of America”, celebrating its Aboriginal protagonist as a hero rather than a victim (Ramsland & Ramsland 2014: 99). It would not be until the 1980s that the first-contact history of Aborigines and European colonisers was rewritten and the genocidal legacy revealed. This was the bone of contention in the so-called History Wars – the ongoing debate in Australia’s public domain on the nature of European settlement of the continent, in which participants defend views on a continuum that moves from benign settlement, minor conflict, tensions and incidental strife to violent invasion, structural guerrilla warfare, massacres, dispossession of tribal land and genocide.

Indigenous writers only started to employ the genre recently so as to do away with engrained colonialist stereotypes and colonial myths. Ramsland & Ramsland point out that Philip McLaren broached new terrain in this sense: “with a number of well received novels, he [McLaren] has mapped out the route for a militant postcolonial discourse based on an insider perspective” (2014: 99). Likewise, Stephen Knight, after observing that Australian crime fiction has voiced the conflict between coloniser and colonised from an exclusively white perspective, celebrates the publication of Philip McLaren’s crime novels in the 1990s as a watershed moment. He highlights McLaren as one of those few Indigenous voices who “have found the genre a highly effective instrument to question the uses of racialized power in the country” (1997: 176). Philip McLaren is of Kamilaroi descent, a mob from northern New South Wales, but was born in 1943 in Redfern, inner Sydney, and married a woman of white British descent. Having worked in Europe and the USA as a graphic artist, set designer, script writer, illustrator and creative director in television and advertising, McLaren might be best described as a broadminded globetrotter who is at home in cosmopolitan environments and finds expressive freedom in a wide range of arts and genres. As a writer, he has earned recognition nationally and abroad, and his work has been awarded and translated into French and German.

Philip McLaren’s oeuvre

Philip McLaren has written six novels to date, four of which address the violence of the colonial project by investigating its criminal character in a wide range of colonial, postcolonial and neo-colonial settings, thus showing his political commitment with the Indigenous cause. The following will discuss his four crime novels to date by placing them in their corresponding socio-political and historical context of writing and by elucidating how they react to issues relating to Indigeneity.

His first novel, *Sweet Water - Stolen Land* (first published by UQP in 1993, reissued by Magabala Books in 2001), won the David Unaipon Award for Literature in 1993. The novel was published in the wake of the Mabo Decision (1992) and Native Title legislation (1993), whose politics reverberate to some extent in the novel. The plot addresses the colonial politics of dispossession and subverts the ‘benign settlement’ paradigm, which holds no violence was perpetrated against the Indigenous-Australian nations in the process of colonisation. The court

case the Torres Strait Islander Eddie Koiki Mabo initiated against the State of Queensland exposed and initiated a new discourse on colonial and postcolonial racism; it also undid the legal fantasy of *Terra Nullius*, by which Australia was declared void of human habitation prior to, and so unproblematically available for, European settlement. On the basis of a Eurocentric interpretation of the concept of civilisation – based on the fixity and permanence of homes, on individual property rights and on Western forms of agriculture and means of production – it denied human status to the Australian Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders, who operated on the basis of a shifting, collective economy of the land. Never acknowledged as nations in their own right by the Australian state, their status is still polemic due to the absence of a treaty which could improve the basis for their legitimate claims against mainstream Australia.

The land rights under dispute in the Mabo case concerned Murray Island, or Mer, in the Torres Strait, which is the homeland of the Meriem people. In 1988, after long years of debate, the Australian High Court declared the State of Queensland's attempts to extinguish Native Title – the traditional ownership of the lands lost by the Indigenous peoples in the process of colonisation – illegal according to the Racial Discrimination Act 1975, in a ruling that is known as Mabo No 1. This was followed by the Mabo No 2 Decision in 1992 – just after the case's principal claimant had died – which found Native Title compatible with Australian Common Law. This ruling acknowledged the legitimacy of Indigenous property rights in the whole of the Australian continent and turned the Mabo case into a landmark victory in the recovery of tribal land. The High Court ruling found its way into the 1993 Native Title legislation under the Labour administration of PM Paul Keating, although its enabling effects were largely undone by the subsequent Wik Decision of 1996 and then further diluted by the Native Title Amendment Act 1998, popularly known as the 10 Point Plan issued by the conservative Howard government.

Sweet Water - Stolen Land reads well against this background. The novel is written as a zero-detection thriller and firmly embedded in Kamilaroi country, which universalises the sensation of crime against community and the local nature of the search for solutions. The novel became a national bestseller as it depicted Australian frontier conflict in northern New South Wales in the mid-nineteenth century (1869), and its first-contact context addresses the Indigenous fight to protect and keep traditional country from a cruel and ruthless colonial invader. It describes the consequences of European settlement for McLaren's mob, the Kamilaroi, by highlighting how brutal violence and dispossession informed the processes of 'Christianisation' and 'civilisation'. McLaren picks up on the infamous Myall Creek massacre near Bingara in northern New South Wales, where ten white Europeans and one black African ambushed and killed 30 unarmed Indigenous Australians on 10 June 1838. The Australian government page on the Myall Creek Memorial site says that

[t]he massacre of approximately 30 Wirrayaraay people at Myall Creek, the subsequent court cases and the hanging of the seven settlers for their role in the massacre was a pivotal moment in the development of the relationship between settlers and Aboriginal people. The Myall Creek massacre is outstanding in the course of Australia's cultural history as it is the [first and] last time the Colonial Administration intervened to ensure the laws of the colony were applied equally to Aboriginal people and settlers involved in frontier killings.¹

McLaren efficiently maps the historical facts of the notorious Myall Creek Massacre onto his mob's contact history to depict the genocidal ways in which white settlers imposed and compounded their understanding of 'legal occupation', *Terra Nullius*, which was the original legal justification for the British colony, asserted by King George V in 1770. Thus, McLaren cleverly uses the only case in Australian history of a court case in which white settler violence was condemned and punished to support his critical review of contact history between colonisers and colonised in the Australian setting.

McLaren shows the Christianising zeal of the German Lutheran pastor Karl Maresh to be utterly depraved in his wish to build a thriving centre of Christian civilisation in the outback: determined to have the local Aborigines live on his mission, Karl murders local white settlers while throwing suspicion onto the Kamilaroi by wielding their weapons and leaving their ritual objects, which he has collected and now put to new, perverse use with warped ethnographic zeal. This leads to white revenge raids and murder, which force the Kamilaroi to seek shelter on mission ground and relinquish their land. Karl pays for his crimes with his own death in ritual payback at the hands of Manduk, the Aboriginal warrior who becomes Karl's wife Gudrun's lover. Gudrun is depicted as responding to her own set of ethical values from the outset of the novel, which pits her against Karl. Gudrun's sense of independence and critique of white masculinity allows McLaren to show that race and gender can team up in the fight against the powers of colonisation, as well as that interracial relations do not necessarily have to be Manichean but may perform on a more sophisticated level of power balances.

McLaren followed up with the highly successful *Scream Black Murder* (HarperCollins 1995, reissued by Magabala Books in 2001), an urban police-detective thriller based on the police killing of David Gundy in Redfern in 1989. In a report commissioned by the National Inquiry into Racial Violence, Chris Cunneen writes that

David Gundy was killed when police raided his home before dawn on 27 April 1989. Eight members of the Special Weapons and Operations Squad, (SWOS) armed with shotguns, a sledge hammer and a search warrant, were seeking a suspect in relation to the murder of a police officer. The suspect was not in the house at the time. David Gunby was killed in his bedroom by a shotgun blast fired by one of the SWOS officers. The colonial inquiry accepted the evidence of officers that the gun had accidentally discharged during a struggle. (1990: 9)

The Ombudsman unsuccessfully "recommended that the procedures and instructions for SWOS in relation to arrest, detention and interrogation be reviewed immediately by the Commissioner of Police" after a series of SWOS misconduct against Aboriginal citizens. At the same time,

The Royal Commission Into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody was prepared to investigate the death of David Gundy. However, a successful challenge was made to the Federal Court by the NSW Police Association. Counsel for the Association argued that the death was outside the Commission's terms of reference because it did not occur in custody. (1990: 9)

Philip McLaren elaborates on the previous from a later vantage point in the novel's prologue. It summarises the Gundy case (1995: viii-x) and points out that, though unmarried, David

Gundy and Dolly Eats had been living without conflict and in bliss for thirteen years until his murder. McLaren contrasts this to the behaviour of

Ted Pickering, the State police minister, [who] was quick to endorse the police action at carefully conducted media conferences. Stern-faced, he told the public that police were feeling 'uptight'. Three years after the killing neither Dolly nor her [Gundy's] son had received an apology from the policeman who killed David, the Police Commissioner or the State Police Minister. Most Australians were deeply shocked by the manner of Gundy's death and understood, perfectly, the distress and outrage Dolly Eats was feeling. Not long after the killing, a video was broadcast on national television showing a police staff party at which two giggling policemen had arrived with their faces blackened with make-up. One had a hangman's noose around his neck. The blackened policemen had signs with the names of two recent dead Aboriginal men on their chests, one was David Gundy, the other was Lloyd Boney. (Mr Boney had recently died under suspicious circumstances while in police custody.) This police behaviour outraged the public: the Australian Prime Minister publicly announced this mockery of Aboriginal deaths to be a disgrace. Mr Hall Wootton QC prepared a report about the Gundy killing for the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody. He found the raid was unlawful and that Mr Gundy was a law-abiding man. He expressed his appal at how the Gundy family had been treated after the raid. More than four years after David Gundy was shot ... the Supreme Court sanctioned an out-of-court settlement of seven hundred thousand dollars as compensation from the New South Wales Government to Mr Gundy's de facto wife Dolly and his son Bradley. (1993: x)

The out-of-court character of the settlement essentially protected the policemen involved in the killing from direct prosecution. Thus remaining fundamentally unresolved, the Gunby case had a major impact on Aboriginal and police relations in Redfern and beyond, and it inspired McLaren to forge an enabling narrative of Australian police procedure as regards his own community, while at the same time denouncing the white racism that makes arrogant, hostile, even criminal behaviour against the Indigenous population possible and condones it. Setting most of the action in Sydney, McLaren breaks new ground by introducing an Indigenous male and female detective as the central characters in the urban setting. In the light of the Gundy killing, it is key for the story that the perspective of the investigators' gaze is Aboriginal and not white, as much as it is key that the criminal to be pursued is the perverse product of the same kind of irrational racist thinking that inspired and condoned Gundy's murder. Members of the first Aboriginal Homicide Unit in New South Wales have 'typical' Aboriginal backgrounds. Gary Leslie comes from a sparring context, whereas Lisa Fuller has a Stolen Generation mission school past. They both engage in the investigation of a deranged white stalker and serial killer, whose italicised stream of consciousness narrative contemplating his murders of black Indigenous women brings (white) readers uncomfortably close to his madness:

I'm not sure that the cops ever found that black girl I shoved into the ocean at Bulli. That was one out of four of mine that didn't make it into the news. That Bulli girl had no idea I was watching her, for weeks I watched her before I grabbed her – it was my disguise. At the theatre I played one of the kids of the musical 'Oliver', I used some of the make-up tricks to make me look like a tramp.

I usually do it that way now. Women never look at drunken tramps, they just don't want to catch your eye ... I know it's a bit conceited but I keep a scrapbook and a video library. (1995: 34-5)

The murderer's motives are located in his traumatically violent youth, while his predilection for killing black women finds free reign in the lax attitude of the authorities towards interracial violence. Yet, McLaren paints a nuanced picture of racism in the way Gary and Lisa are tolerated and supported by some (but not all) non-Indigenous colleagues in the corps. Gary and Lisa steer clear of the hard-boiled ruffian type detective who walks the margins of the law to achieve their aims. It is of critical importance that they perform their corrective action in unblemished ways so as to root the centre of moral correctness in Indigenous culture and not to fall prey to the critical eye of white scrutiny. Thus they follow a strict police procedural method to hunt down the killer, and in doing so, prove their effectiveness and worth as investigators and agents of law while doing away with the 'natural suspicion' the police authorities have usually received in Australian society and fiction.

McLaren's third novel, *Lightning Mine* (HarperCollins 1999), is a zero-detection thriller that focuses on the political influence of the powerful multinational mining industry on contemporary Australian society. By choosing the country's Top End, rich in minerals, as its setting, it allows for an analysis of mining's impact on nature and culture, and the fight of the Aboriginal owners to put a stop to the destruction of sacred land. By the time of writing this novel, multinational mining lobbies and projects in Australia's outback had already been well documented, and data regarding their business ventures had reached the public sphere. One of the most notorious players in the field was CRA (Conzinc Rio Tinto of Australia), nowadays part of the multinational mining-giant Rio Tinto, Australia's largest mining company, and one of the country's biggest privately-owned corporations. One of its largest exploitations is in the Northern Territory:

In 1990, CRA discovered the Century zinc deposit, north-west of Mount Isa [near Cloncurry, 300 km south of the Gulf of Carpentaria]. This world class resource contains 118Mt of ore averaging 10.2 percent zinc, 1.5 percent lead and 35 g/t silver and will be developed by Pasminco Century Mine Limited (PCML). The Century mine will produce 450,000t of zinc concentrate and 45,000t of lead concentrate per year for export from the port of Karumba [at the mouth of the Norman River in the Gulf of Carpentaria]. In May 1997, an agreement between the Waayni, Mingginda, Gkuthaarn and Kukatji peoples, the State and Century Zinc was ratified and the Government obligations under the agreement are being implemented.ⁱⁱ

CRA has a bad track record for encroaching upon Aboriginal territory and denying Indigenous land rights, which was echoed in a national 1981 car bumper sticker campaign by the Aboriginal Information Centre which read "Don't CRAP on our land!"ⁱⁱⁱ The ongoing impact of the mining industry on the continent is evident in Australia's largest private fortunes being located in this area of the economy – for 2014, these were: Gina Rinehart with 20 billion US\$ (1st position); Ivan Glasenberg with 6.6 billion US\$ (5th position); Andrew Forrest with more than 5.9 billion US\$ (10th position)^{iv}; Angela Bennett with 1.6 billion US\$ (22nd position); and Clive Palmer with 1.2 billion US\$ (28th position). The mining industry is responsible for 60% of Australian exports (2014) and so Australia's economy is largely dependent upon its presence. Not surprisingly, the mining industry's lobby is politically

empowered, perhaps most blatantly so in the case of Clive Palmer and his Palmer United Party, which gained representation in Federal Parliament through the city of Fairfax in Queensland. The main focus of present and future mining activity is the Indigenous South West of Western Australia, which is currently divided over the 'One-Billion-Dollar Deal' between the State Government and the Noongar peoples, a compensation for rights of mineral exploitation that – at best – equals one of Australia's lesser private mining fortunes – Clive Palmer's to be precise (Roman 2015).

Lightning Mine's depiction of aggressive, violent presidential and corporate politics – blackmail, manipulation and murders included – is well in line with the previous analysis of the Australian economy, and the novel denounces the white mainstream's greed, justified by its alleged entitlement to traditional country. It puts the novel's resolution in the hands of a special 'detective' and Indigenous avenger, Namarrkon, "The Lightning Spirit [who] causes severe tropical storms, destroys homes, and kills people", and so restores the balance in traditional country. McLaren draws inspiration for this character from local Dreamtime accounts:

It is believed that if man disturbs the sacred dreaming site of Namarrkon, the Spirit will send a violent storm which will result in severe destruction and death. About 30 miles east of Oenpelli [east of Darwin in the Northern Territory] there is a taboo dreaming site called Namarrkon which is the camping place of this Dreamtime Spirit. It is a sacred site which is rarely approached by Aboriginal people who fear the wrath of the lightning spirit who lives there. (1999: 312-13)

In the novel, McLaren makes the severe lightning Namarrkon provokes scientifically plausible by linking it to the massive presence of iron ore deposits in the area. These allegedly enhance the impact of tropical storms with intense discharges of energy through excessive lightning, caused by the high conductivity of the subsoil. On the last pages of the novel, such a storm is responsible for the total annihilation of the MDG/Global Mining corporation's brand-new extraction installations built to exploit the locality's massive iron sources. The day-mining operation is depicted as a red sore that festers in the surrounding landscape and so begs removal and repair:

In one year, Jarra had seen the whole Namarrkon area transformed from pristine green tropical wilderness—as it had been for countless thousands of years—into a 20 mile wide red desert. Massive machines roamed the surface, while yellow, grey and blue structures dotted the landscape on geometric roadways—circles of roads linked to more circles by short straight sections. On a normal workday there were hundreds of men in light blue overalls running about the place. All of these objects were colour-designed to contrast against the blistering rust-red earth—they were meant to be seen. (1999: 292)

The bulk of company staff and its executives die in the cyclone's rage, and only a few people survive the weather's onslaught – those favourable to a respectful treatment of the land, such as the American mining surveyor Aaron Shoemaker, who played a decisive role in prospecting the area but has changed allegiance. He has taken issue with the company for its ruthless policies and teamed up with the Indigenous, politically astute lawyer and negotiator Jarra, who is responsible for a strategic alliance with the trade unions in the fight against MDG/Global. Aaron makes it to safety so as to call in help for his wife Lee and Jarra, who

have barely survived the destruction. It turns *Lightning Mine* into a story of personal redemption that points the way out of capitalist greed into environmentalist engagement. As Alexis Wright does in her epic *Carpentaria* (2006), McLaren lets country itself restore the natural balance that the neocolonialist excesses of white civilisation have disturbed.

Coinciding with Federal military action at the Top End, McLaren's fourth, *Murder in Utopia* (Fr: Éditions Traversées 2006/En: Cockatoo Books 2009), came with a significant statement of intentions. Introducing the novel, McLaren writes: "There is a real place name Utopia, it's situated in the red-desert centre of Australia. This story is not about that place, nor is it about any real people. I found the irony irresistible: imagine naming a place Utopia, a place so impoverished, so desolate" (2009: 4). McLaren picks up on the disastrous statistics regarding Australian Indigeneity: especially remote Aboriginal communities constitute, rather than a utopia, a Fourth World within one of the world's wealthiest nations. Aboriginal scholar, Elder and spokeswoman Marcia Langton claims that "Aboriginal society is sliding into a terminal state of under-development," highlighting:

... the unassailable facts in hundreds of impoverished Aboriginal communities across remote Australia: radically shortened lives; the highest national rates of unemployment; widespread violence, endemic alcohol and substance abuse; the lowest national levels of education; and lifelong morbidity for hapless citizens suffering from heart disease, nutrition and lifestyle-related diseases such as diabetes. (2008: 155, 158)

These facts were used by the conservative Howard Federal Government to occupy the Northern Territory in 2007, further spurred by a heart-rending report on child sexual abuse and domestic violence in its remote Aboriginal communities. While nobody will deny that Indigenous dysfunctionality in these remote communities is rampant, the Northern Territory Emergency Response (also known as the NT Intervention or Invasion) has further disempowered Indigenous society by suspending rights and entitlements and imposing an assimilative agenda (See Altman and Hinkson 2007 among others). Ironically, Alexis Wright was awarded Australia's most important literary prize, the Miles Franklin, for *Carpentaria* on the very day the Intervention started.

Whereas McLaren's *Murder in Utopia* is a fictionalised construct of Aboriginal dysfunctionality in a remote community, the mainstream journalist and documentary maker John Pilger situates his 2013 report *Utopia* in the Northern Territory's location of the same name, no doubt attracted by the same irony that McLaren highlights in the contrast between the locality's ingrained poverty and the bright future its toponym unsuccessfully beckons toward. Indeed, Pilger uses this contrast as the structuring device that underpins his analysis of Australian Indigeneity at large in postcolonial times. *The Guardian* newspaper provided the following review of Pilger's latest film:

Veteran investigator John Pilger has an extraordinary story to tell about white Australia and its deeply dysfunctional relationship with the Indigenous Australian community. Pilger sees it as unrepentant apartheid, and cites a bizarre act of taxpayer-funded official hysteria: the 2007 "intervention" in the Northern Territory organised by the John Howard government on the pretext that paedophile gangs were operating in Indigenous settlements. Troops were sent in; townships were compulsorily acquired and native title legislation

ignored. Yet no prosecution for child abuse resulted, and studies appeared to conclude that the situation was no better or worse than in white areas.

The awful truth is that Indigenous communities are on mineral-rich lands that cause mouths to water in mining corporation boardrooms. Even if the "intervention" wasn't a straightforward land grab, then it suited powerful people who have a vested interest in keeping Indigenous Australians second-class, itinerant and stateless citizens in their own state, without anything like the consideration that Native Americans have achieved in the US. They are still living in desperately poor conditions, and can expect more insidious harassment. Pilger's film argues that the history of abuse and bullying, so far from being a closed chapter, is merely a prelude: it is set to get worse. This is a grim and powerful film. (Bradshaw 2013)

McLaren's *Murder in Utopia* delivers its social criticism by describing the trials and tribulations of a prestigious but alcoholic surgeon, Jack Nugent, who becomes one of the countless homeless victims of New York's frantic pace of life and seeks shelter in Utopia's deprived Aboriginal community in the Australian Outback. The novel constitutes itself as a minimal-detection thriller (involving minor police presence) in a specific geographical setting 250 km north-east of Alice Springs, a neglected Aboriginal homestead in the red centre of Australia. Nugent's informed outsider perspective allows McLaren to drive home the dire living conditions of the Indigenous Australians in remote communities:

[Jack] was extremely agitated and angry. Almost every child he saw that week was deaf. Half the women and nearly all the man had syphilis – most of them had come in presenting other symptoms: influenza, and more serious, whooping cough. There were several who were suffering pulmonary tuberculosis. But it was the fact that he diagnosed three cases of terminal leprosy and was compelled by government regulations to remove into a quarantine community 700 km away that angered him most. World medical organisations had long ago announced that leprosy had been treated out of existence. Yet here new cases were reported every year and victims lived out their remaining years away from their family and friends: the Australian government quietly maintained a leper colony in which all patients were Aboriginal. Nugent continually asked himself the question: how could this neglect be allowed to happen? (2009: 66)

Utopia's alcohol-free community provides this renegade professional the opportunity to redeem himself as a medical practitioner, even if Utopia's medical centre is underfunded and inadequately equipped. What is more, his contract's terms force him to work as a stand-in coroner for the understaffed local police force, and soon Nugent must participate in solving a crime involving sexual violence and its ritual punishment within tribal law, which clashes with western legislation. The victim Jimmy Djungawarri's emasculated corpse irresistibly draws Nugent into a web of mystery which needs inside help to be untangled. Carla Kunaardi, an attractive Aboriginal lawyer devoted to improving the community's standard of living, becomes his lover and fiancée, and instrumental in solving the murder. Carla is not the only strong and independent female character, as the narrative displays a series of empowered women that undercut female victimisation and gendered violence: Will and Nora, Nugent's diligent nurses and assistants at Utopia's medical centre; the two gifted women Aboriginal

artists Edith Bungwarrye and Berta Gwandjulpur; and the latter's daughter Esmay, the Clever Woman endowed with the gift of clairvoyance. McLaren is nuanced in his depiction of interracial contact and relationships and proffers an interracial love affair as the path towards repair. The remote setting near Alice Springs allows McLaren to address the conflict between tribal and western law, as well as the exploitation of Aboriginal art by western intermediaries. As art is one of the very few means of income in remote communities, this puts into question to what extent remote communities can find independent economic bases for their development within a mainstream framework. The latter issue is, of course, of vital importance in the face of the enduring character of the Northern Territory Intervention.

Philip McLaren within Australian (crime) fiction

Philip McLaren uses crime fiction so as to address the awkward embedding of Indigenous Australia within mainstream society, creating an apt vehicle for his criticism of mainstream attitudes towards Indigeneity. As Mireille Vignol corroborates, Aboriginal issues are

... part of the social economic background [in his novels,] and they determine often the motivation of the characters [and so he has] dealt with the stolen generation, black deaths in custody, domestic violence, alcoholism, police harassment, land and cultural dispossession, massacres, everyday racism, [and] health. (2002: 4 of 5)

By not sticking to one particular setting or character and so avoiding set formulas, McLaren writes back to ingrained literary tropes and not surprisingly, he considers Arthur Upfield's series of Napoleon Bonaparte novels as "outdated, patronizing and stereotypical and his characterization as thin and culturally unconvincing" (Ramsland & Ramsland 2012: 99). Unlike some non-Aboriginal Australian crime fiction, McLaren's crime novels and thrillers work with a strong sense of place which may precisely boost the role of the Indigenous land as an active agent in the detection and the application of justice. According to Stephen Knight, one common way of treating the land in the non-Indigenous Australian crime novel is to create a "touristic version" of it. The land in these novels is "not so much owned as inspected in excitable and alarmed tones", charting its dangers and powers for readership abroad. Of course, the notion of 'visitor' in the Indigenous crime novel would align the non-Indigenous settler with the tourist. We can adapt Knight's words to our purpose, then, and consider Namarrkon's impact in *Lightning Mine* in the following terms – the land as an "avenger" and agent of payback:

...flood, fire, avalanche, snake or crocodile can act as agents of vengeance destroying the criminal. But they are not merely useful, and even simplistic, plot devices; they also suggest that there are evaluative capacities in the land itself, that visitors [substitute for: colonial invaders] can themselves become disturbingly involved in a power greater and more threatening than they or the inhabitants can sometimes comprehend. (1997: 144)

In a way, *Lightning Mine* restages the land conflict of McLaren's first novel in contemporary neocapitalist and neocolonialist terms. Thus, *Sweet Water - Stolen Land* could be interpreted along similar lines. Marduk's bush skills and understanding of the land, for example, are an

expression of the healthy relationship between human guardians and the restorative powers of country.

In line with common practice in some Australian mainstream crime fiction, McLaren has often used the zero or minimal detection mode so as to avoid the use of serial characters, which, combined with a penchant for the local, in turn favours the land – *country* – as the real protagonist in resolving crime and conflict and confers Indigenous flavour to his fiction. *Sweet Water - Stolen Land* and *Lightning Mine* are zero-detection novels whose resolutions are provided by the omniscient narrator, while *Murder in Utopia* employs minimal detection in the shape of a renegade New York surgeon acting as stand-in coroner in the outback. Set in Sydney, *Scream Black Murder* is different in that it is a reaction against the marginal role that Indigenous have played in crime detection as black trackers, and makes its Aboriginal detective-inspectors central to the narrative as they employ police procedural to track and catch a white serial killer. In pushing Indigenous crime fiction into the mainstream, *Scream Black Murder* broke new ground. Public recognition was rife and the novel was short-listed for the Ned Kelly Crime Writers' Award (Knight 1997: 124).

Another peculiarity in McLaren's fiction is that the author has never restricted himself to a particular formula within the crime genre or without. His fourth novel, *There Will Be New Dreams* is his well-achieved and well-received answer to a critique of his work from the perspective of *écriture féminine*. McLaren puts it as follows:

I sat on a panel at the Sydney Writers Festival one year and a few of the people on that panel were asked how we approached our writing and our characters, how we developed our work. Someone put forward the idea that generally men write plot driven works and women write character driven works. I took that as a certain challenge and I didn't entirely agree with it. I opposed the argument in the public forum and afterwards we went into the Green Room and we continued to chat. A lot of other writers who were sitting back there got involved in it as well, and I really had to agree with her in the end. Generally speaking that that was true, that men have these plots, they kind of go galloping on and have these climaxes and mini climaxes all the way through the book really, but women take more time with their characters and they spend more time developing their characters. So 'There'll be New Dreams' was my attempt at writing a character driven novel which didn't rely heavily on plot and all these extreme circumstances that we'd like to dramatise our stories with that we kind of dot all the way through. So I really let the characters take over and I wanted to have a book full of characters and this was my attempt to do that. (Vignol 2002: 1 of 5)

What Kevin Brophy calls a "picaresque novel of character" (2002, n.p.) paints an enabling "mosaic of stories, spanning over 30 thousand years and following Aborigines and others here and abroad [in which] McLaren lets the characters construct the plot. The result is a complex and entertaining web, completely stereotype-free" as Mireille Vignol writes (2002: 1 of 5). His sixth novel, *West of Eden – The Real Man from Snowy River: The Original* (2009), equally departs from previously-trodden paths in employing docu-fiction ("fully-documented fiction" as his webpage says^v) to narrate the life of Toby, a legendary Indigenous horseman. His life inspired Banjo Patterson's famous, near-eponymous poem that became an icon of White-Australian bush culture and is recovered by McLaren to express its Indigenous

heritage. His seventh novel, *Black Silk*, is a work in progress which returns to the legal thriller mode.

Conclusion

Australian crime fiction has special features resultant from the continent's particular history of colonial invasion and settlement as a penal colony; it has generated special narrative genres and modes to address the idiosyncracies of settler society, which Indigenous authors have started writing back to only recently. A good example of the latter development is the crime fiction written by the Indigenous author Philip McLaren, which offers a strong sense of place and a shifting use of characters and detection options that in combination offer an enabling inscription of country for the Indigenous community. In 2009, Ken Gelder and Paul Salzman held that "Contemporary Aboriginal fiction is still primarily autobiographical and genealogical, uncovering family histories and negotiating identities in relation to kinship claims on place." Yet, they continue that "McLaren's murder mysteries/thrillers are unusual in this respect, although these popular genres do of course share autobiographical fiction's narrative drive towards individual discovery and self-discovery" (2009: 61). One may argue that McLaren has already wrought and found 'his place' in a crossover between Western mainstream and Indigenous cultures and is therefore less concerned with individual identity formation than with the grand picture of Indigenous disenfranchisement and disempowerment and the violence this generates in Indigenous society. Bearing in mind that his latest work in progress is a crime novel, there is no doubt McLaren will continue to employ the detective and thriller genres in future writing projects as an appropriate mode to reply to the ingrained racism and violence confronting his people. However, he shows himself unconstrained by literary pigeonholes when his particular range of interests and needs thus require, and therefore refuses the epithet 'crime writer'. It is probably fair to say that his penchant for crime fiction is a 'natural' consequence of the violence that permeates Aboriginal society rather than a commercial choice: tellingly, he rejected the publisher's proposal to write a series after *Scream Black Murder*'s success, his 'purest' detective novel according to western standards. His eclectic body of writing is an apt reflection of his commitment with the Indigenous community, his cosmopolitan curiosity and his sense of freedom of expression.

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ⁱ The location became a memorial site on 7 June 2008. See Works Cited: "Myall Creek Massacre and Memorial Site".

ⁱⁱ See Works Cited: "Century Zinc...". One of Australia's foremost Indigenous authors, Alexis Wright, belongs to the Waanyi Nation and has repeatedly taken issue with the mining industry's impact in her essays and fiction, notably her award-winning novel *Carpentaria* (2006), which is set at the mouth of the quasi-homophonous 'Normal' River.

ⁱⁱⁱ See Works Cited: "The Gulliver CRA Dossier".

^{iv} See Works Cited: "BRW Rich 200".

^v See Works Cited: "West of Eden ...".

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Cornelis Martin Renes holds a PhD in English Literature from the University of Barcelona and lectures at its Department of English and German Studies. His main area of interest is the study of film and novels from a postcolonial point of view within the larger framework of Cultural and Australian Studies. He co-directs the University of Barcelona's interdisciplinary *Observatory: Australian Studies Centre*, through which he co-edits the journal *Coolabah* and he is the current Chair of the European Association for Studies of Australia, EASA. He has also co-convened congresses on Australian Studies in collaboration with similar centres at Southern Cross University NSW, Curtin University WA, and the University of Tasmania: <http://www.ub.edu/dpfilsa/>.