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## Screaming 'Black' Murder: Crime Fiction and the Construction of Ethnic Identities

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### Abstract

A significant segment of crime fiction is concerned with the representation of ethnic identities and may to some extent be considered paradigmatic of the participation of literary texts in discourses on race and minorities. This article explores constructions of ethnic identities in American, British, and South African crime fiction from the 1920s to the early twenty-first century. In particular, the focus will be on such texts in which the ethno-cultural identity of the detective gives special prominence not only to the ethnic particularity of the fictional character itself and of its environs but frequently also to that of its author. Main texts discussed are Rudolph Fisher's *The Conjure Man Dies* (1932), Earl Derr Biggers' *The House Without a Key* (1925) and *The Black Camel* (1929), Walter Mosley's *Devil in a Blue Dress* (1990) and *Little Scarlet* (2004) as well as James McClure's *The Gooseberry Fool* (1974) and Patrick Neate's *City of Tiny Lights* (2005). It is argued that all of these texts have a distinct subversive potential of which the construction of ethnic identities becomes the main vehicle because these identities are the products and the catalysts of the conflicts negotiated in ethnic crime fiction and correlating to 'reality'.

### Keywords

Twentieth-century crime fiction; twenty-first century crime fiction; literary constructions of identity; black detective fiction; ethnic detective fiction; cross-ethnic literature; power relationships in literature

Targeting a broad readership and generally addressing questions of human behaviour, societal norms, tensions, and ‘aberrations’, crime fiction has become an experimental arena of subversive potential and of pervasive influence.<sup>1</sup> Recent scholarly interest in crime fiction has been stimulated especially in the postcolonial context but also with respect to power relationships between the sexes or different ethnicities.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, a particular segment of crime fiction is primarily concerned with the representation of ethnic identities and may to some extent be considered paradigmatic of the participation of literary texts in discourses on race and minorities. Ethnic crime fiction has evolved into an immensely prolific genre that has been perpetuated and modified by writers such as Chester Himes, James Sallis, and Walter Mosley (African American detectives); Harry Kemelman and Faye Kellerman (Jewish detectives); Toni Hillerman and Jean Hager (Native American detectives); James Melville and Dale Furutani (Japanese detectives); Arthur Upfield and Paul McLaren (Aboriginal detectives), to name but a few of its better known practitioners in the Anglophone world.

With the construction of ethnic identities in American, British, and South African crime fiction from the 1920s to the early twenty-first century, I propose to explore in this

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<sup>1</sup> For a critical discussion of the subversive potential of crime fiction, see, e.g., Pepper, “Black Crime Fiction”, 210–11, 223.

<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., Pearson and Singer, *Detective Fiction in a Postcolonial and Transnational World*; Matzke and Mühleisen, *Postcolonial Postmortems*; Klein, *Diversity and Detective Fiction*; Tickell, “‘Elementary, My Dear Hameed’”; Christian, “Ethnic Postcolonial Crime and Detection”; de Kock, “From the Subject of Evil to the Evil Subject”; Binder, “Whose Story Is Written on Her Dead Body?”; Ribas Segura, “Phryne Fisher”; and Brisley, “Detective fiction and working through”.

article a small corner of this experimental arena. My main focus will not be on constructions of ethnic identities which surface only marginally, nor will I primarily concentrate on such texts in which the perpetrator is the stranger or the outsider. Rather, I will examine such texts in which the ethno-cultural identity of the detective gives special prominence not only to the ethnic particularity of the fictional character itself and of its environs but frequently also to that of its author. More specifically, the texts I will chiefly be looking into – Rudolph Fisher’s *The Conjure Man Dies* (1932) and Walter Mosley’s *Devil in a Blue Dress* (1990) and *Little Scarlet* (2004) – project black identities. However, with the object of introducing a more comparative perspective, I will also critically interrogate a number of ‘cross-ethnic’ crime novels; texts, such as Earl Derr Biggers’ *The House Without a Key* (1925) and *The Black Camel* (1929), James McClure’s *The Gooseberry Fool* (1974), and Patrick Neate’s *City of Tiny Lights* (2005), in which the figure of the ethnic detective – Chinese, Bantu, and Anglo-Pakistani – was conceived by white writers arguably so as to prompt a more nuanced perception of ethnic difference. In fact, I suggest that all of these texts have a distinct subversive potential of which the construction of ethnic identities becomes the main vehicle because these identities are the products and the catalysts of the conflicts negotiated in these ethnic crime fictions and correlate also to the ‘reality’ outside the narrative.

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The proliferation of the ethnic detective, especially since the 1970s, is to some extent a phenomenon that needs to be considered in the context of the multiculturalism debates of the last decades. It is as such closely related to socio-economic, political and cultural developments and has to be read as the product of the experience of crises, of cultural contact, and of shifting power relationships. But the ethnic detective’s antecedents go much further back than that. They in fact appear to originate in African American literature: Pauline Hopkins’ *Hagar’s Daughter. A Story of Southern Caste Prejudice*, first published between

1901 and 1902 in instalments in *Colored American Magazine*, and John Edward Bruce's *The Black Sleuth*, published between 1907 and 1909 in *McGirt's Magazine*, are cited as the supposedly earliest examples. Both, as has been shown by Stephen F. Soitos, make use of the form and conventions of detective fiction in order to contrast the racist Euro-American hegemony with an Afrocentric worldview.<sup>3</sup> Both series introduce 'black' detectives, and in particular in Bruce's unfinished novel, featuring with Sadipe Okukenu an African-born detective, ties to Africa and an African past achieve crucial significance.<sup>4</sup>

More recently, Rudolph Fisher's *The Conjure-Man Dies. A Mystery Tale of Dark Harlem* (1932) has been credited with initiating African American crime fiction because it is the first 'black' detective novel to be set entirely within a 'black' environment and to engage with supposedly specifically African American concerns – with African heritage, with race prejudice and with superstition.<sup>5</sup> In his novel, Fisher brings together four detectives whose methods differ markedly from one another. With this, as Soitos has shown, Fisher not only turns against the figure of the omniscient detective in the tradition of Sherlock Holmes or Hercule Poirot.<sup>6</sup> Rather, the four detectives embody the diversity of black Harlem's social reality whose complexity can be unravelled in this particular case only through the collaboration of all four.<sup>7</sup>

Fisher was one of the writers of the Harlem Renaissance, whose objective it was to articulate a specifically 'black' aesthetics which was to be based on the self-representation

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<sup>3</sup> See Soitos, *Blues Detective*, 221.

<sup>4</sup> See Bertens and D'haen, *Contemporary American Crime Fiction*, 179.

<sup>5</sup> See Woods, *Spooks, Spies, and Private Eyes*, xv.

<sup>6</sup> Soitos, *Blues Detective*, 93–124.

<sup>7</sup> See Cacioppo, "Insider Knowledge", 29.

and the shaping of authentic forms of expression of African Americans as promoted, for instance, by Alain Locke in *The New Negro* in 1925. Fisher's novel needs to be seen in this context and may have been conceived at least partly as a response to Carl Van Vechten's controversial novel *Nigger Heaven* of 1926, in which the white writer and photographer sketched a multi-faceted portrait of manners of black Harlem.

Van Vechten himself had tirelessly campaigned for a specifically black literature and culture and encouraged young black authors to write about contemporary Harlem.<sup>8</sup> His own extremely successful novel turned the area north of 125th Street in Manhattan into an immediate attraction and initiated a downright "Harlemania" – a phenomenon acknowledged with Duke Ellington's eponymous fox-trot (1929). While this led to an opening of the white book market for black writers, *Nigger Heaven* was at the same time, as has been observed by Cary D. Wintz, "the most important single event in creating the Negro craze and sending thousands of whites into Harlem's speakeasies and clubs ... looking for a sensual, erotic and primitive thrill".<sup>9</sup> Although the search for the exotic and primitive is to be seen in conjunction with the project of modernism, this fascination proved to be ambivalent – as did Van Vechten's novel – in that it contributed to the perpetuation and petrification of stereotypical conceptions of the black 'other'.

In 1945, this process was described evocatively by Hugh M. Gloster who asserted that Van Vechten's *Nigger Heaven* was "[p]erhaps the most popular novel of Negro life during the 1920's". The black scholar saw in the novel

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<sup>8</sup> See, e.g., Coleman, *Carl Van Vechten*, 157.

<sup>9</sup> Wintz, *Black Culture*, 95.

a work which not only dramatized the alleged animalism and exoticism of Harlem folk but also influenced the writings of Negro Renaissance authors. Appearing at the proper time, when the Negro was making considerable headway as a stellar performer in the entertainment world as well as when white Americans were inordinately curious about so-called picturesque and primitive facets of Harlem society, *Nigger Heaven* enjoyed widespread popularity and became a sort of guidebook for visitors who flocked uptown seeking a re-creation of the African jungle in the heart of New York City.<sup>10</sup>

Gloster's text inadvertently echoes the practice he denounces. The "Negro" as a collective entity (note the stereotyping singular) and reductively conceived in essentialist terms, is juxtaposed to the curious "white Americans" (in individualising plural). Animalism and exoticism, the picturesque and the primitive – phrases from which Gloster distances himself with adjectives like "alleged" and "so-called" – nevertheless appear to be distinctive categories which serve as parameters for the recreation of the African jungle in the midst of white civilisation. Harlem turns into a kind of diorama in which the fascinating and entirely domesticated 'other' can safely be observed. In the terms of postcolonial theory, this is the unmitigated gaze of the coloniser on the colonised subject.<sup>11</sup>

The question about the authenticity of the portrait of manners sketched in Van Vechten's novel is at the same time the question about the authenticity of the author. In other words: can – and may – a white author 'appropriate' a black milieu? Of course, conceptions of 'authenticity' have long since been discredited as essentialist. And yet, it was, after all, precisely one of the objectives of the Harlem Renaissance that the black America culturally

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<sup>10</sup> Gloster, "Van Vechten Vogue", 310.

<sup>11</sup> See, e.g., Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, *Post-Colonial Studies*, 187.

represent itself and thus contribute to the cultural regeneration of the entire country. Of course an emancipatory endeavour of this kind was predicated on the very premises it sought to escape. It, too, had to be essentialist by default because, as soon as an identity is conceived as an alternative construct, an opposition is generated of ‘one’ and ‘the other’ or – more poignantly – of ‘we’ and ‘them’.

The cultural theorist Stuart Hall has explained the appeal of such essentialist conceptions of identity in a postcolonial context with their potential of providing coherence and meaning.<sup>12</sup> Based on an essentialist conception of identity, cultural production (literature and film, for instance) appears to be an effective vehicle of differentiation. As Hall suggests: “Such texts restore an imaginary fullness or plenitude, to set against the broken rubric of our past. They are resources of resistance and identity”.<sup>13</sup> Texts which are shaped and informed by an essentialist conception of identity may not satisfy the current vogue for processual identification patterns as ‘resources’ of resistance and identity. Yet like the essentialist conception of identity to whose generation and perpetuation they contribute, they remain documents of historical interest of the colonial confrontation, not least because the auto-stereotypes inherent in them are to be seen as the product of the no less essentialist hetero-stereotyping through the coloniser. Clearly, the debate about the ‘authenticity’ of the emerging African American literature and its authors during the Harlem Renaissance that had been further polarised by the publication of Van Vechten’s novel needs to be understood in this context.

For the black writer, anthropologist and politician James Weldon Johnson, *Nigger Heaven* was a realistic portrait of black Harlem: “It is all life. It is all reality”, he maintained

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<sup>12</sup> See Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora”.

<sup>13</sup> Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora”, 112.



in his review of the novel.<sup>14</sup> However, like the other Johnson, the sociologist Charles S., who endorsed the novel because he rejected a segregated culture as inferior,<sup>15</sup> James Weldon Johnson largely ignored the aspect of black self-representation. This had been reasserted by W. E. B. DuBois. In his own review, he pronounced Van Vechten's novel to be "a blow in the face" and "an affront to the hospitality of black folk and to the intelligence of the white".<sup>16</sup> DuBois, at least implicitly, thus insisted on the color line in literary production which was determined by the convergence of subject matter and ethnic descent.

Although Rudolph Fisher, a friend of Van Vechten's, read the galley proofs of *Nigger Heaven* and publicly approved of the novel,<sup>17</sup> his own novel may still be read as a 're-appropriation' of black culture, as a 'writing back' against Van Vechten's 'white' representation. However, he may have responded more directly to other, less sympathetic, white writers and their 'appropriation' of black culture, most obviously perhaps Octavius Roy Cohen's stories revolving around the black detective Florian Slappey which had been serialised in the 1920s and 1930s in the *Philadelphia Saturday Evening Post*. In these stories, recognised by Stephen Knight as "not unlike a black version of the Charlie Chan stories"<sup>18</sup> and later to be collected as *Florian Slappey Goes Abroad* (1928) and *Florian Slappey* (1938), the elegantly dressed detective, described as "a sepia gentleman" and as "Beau Brummell of Birmingham, Alabama",<sup>19</sup> is an overtly comic character who has abandoned his native South.

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<sup>14</sup> Johnson, "Romance and Tragedy in Harlem", 393.

<sup>15</sup> See Worth, "Nigger Heaven", 465.

<sup>16</sup> Du Bois, "Review of *Nigger Heaven*", 81.

<sup>17</sup> See Worth, "Nigger Heaven", 462–3.

<sup>18</sup> Knight, *Crime Fiction*, 182.

<sup>19</sup> Cohen, *Florian Slappey*, 1.

He turns into a private investigator in Harlem and is strongly characterised by his presumably ‘droll’ black accent.

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Stephen Knight’s comparison with Charlie Chan is pertinent particularly in view of the author’s ethnic identity which differs from that of his detective. Like Cohen, Earl Derr Biggers was white; but unlike Cohen, he did not attempt in his novels to sketch another ethnic community. In his novels, too, some episodes are set in an underworld that is portrayed largely stereotypically and whose Asian contingent is characterised by established clichés. Yet for the most part, Biggers’ efforts at ‘cross-ethnicity’ are concentrated on the construction of the ethnic identity of his Hawaiian detective of Chinese descent.

Fist introduced in 1925 in *The House Without a Key*, the character of Charlie Chan was soon appropriated by Hollywood. The six novels which were published during the short lifetime of the author (1884–1933) are set off by altogether forty-four films which were in fact instrumental in establishing the detective’s popularity. Yet the same films have provoked since the 1960s the fierce criticism of Asian American and African American pressure groups and have indirectly discredited also the nowadays all but forgotten novels – unjustly, it seems to me.

In fact, in Biggers’ novels the character of Chan appears to be a construct which was conceived in deliberate contrast to conventional representations of Asian – or more specifically – Chinese perfidiousness. The extremely popular *Fu Manchu* novels of the British writer Sax Rohmer (i.e. Arthur Henry Sarsfield Ward) which had been produced after the first serialisation of *The Mystery of Dr. Fu Manchu* in 1912–1913 and which, just before Biggers’ novels, were also discovered by Hollywood, had contributed instrumentally to the dissemination of this stereotype. It may be of some interest in this context that the diabolical

Dr Fu Manchu, “the yellow peril incarnate in one man”,<sup>20</sup> was impersonated between 1929–1931 in three films – *The Mysterious Dr. Fu Manchu* (1929), *The Return of Dr. Fu Manchu* (1930) and *Daughter of the Dragon* (1931) – by Warner Oland who, in 1931, was also the first actor to play the Chinese detective in *Charlie Chan Carries On* and who, until his death in 1938, starred in altogether sixteen Charlie Chan films. If nothing else, the Chinese detective with his flowery diction and inexhaustible fundus of proverbial wisdom challenged the established negative stereotype with a positive one.

And yet Chan – even in Stephen Knight’s very informed recent study of *Crime Fiction, 1800–2000* – is habitually dismissed as a mere exotic “whose exceptionality confirmed the whiteness of the power to detect”.<sup>21</sup> To me, this seems to be a simplification which doubtlessly is to be accounted for by the fact that Biggers’ six novels are indeed permeated with essentialist stereotypes. But such a simplification does justice neither to the character of Chan nor to its creator: identity conflicts and cultural relativism resulting from cultural contact are – if sometimes obliquely – repeatedly at issue in the novels.

When, in *The House Without a Key*, a Chinese jeweller remembers a suspect’s face only vaguely – in Chan’s paraphrase: “Lau Ho is not aware of name, and can not describe, all Japanese faces being uninteresting outlook for him”<sup>22</sup> – then this puts a spin on stereotypical conceptions of the facial characteristics of other ethnicities as being indistinguishable, because the actual differences – in this case between Chinese and Japanese – are emphasised. At the same time, the Chinese jeweller’s statement serves as a reminder that this is precisely

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<sup>20</sup> Rohmer, *Insidious Dr. Fu-Manchu*, 17.

<sup>21</sup> Knight, *Crime Fiction*, 182.

<sup>22</sup> Biggers, *House Without a Key*, 215; subsequently referred to parenthetically as HK.

the same reductive perception of the other which whites frequently apply to Asians in general.

In *The Black Camel*, published in 1929, Chan rejects the explicitly articulated essentialism and cultural myopia of an English butler:

“The Chinese cook has exhibited all the worst qualities of a heathen race – I’m sure I beg your pardon.”

“A heathen race,” repeated Charlie gravely, “that was busy inventing the art of printing at a moment when gentlemen in Great Britain were still beating one another over head with spiked clubs. Pray excuse this brief reference to history ....”<sup>23</sup>

Despite the candour with which such articulations of cultural relativism are articulated in Biggers’ novels, there remains a lurking danger that they may be attributed to, and even obscured by, the protagonist’s frequently comic idiosyncracies.

As will have emerged from the quoted extracts, a significant factor in the characterisation of Chan is his idiosyncratic use of language. To Chan, English as the official language of his adopted country – Hawaii, and thus of the United States of America – is extremely important. It serves him as a pattern of identification and for the construction of his own externally projected identity. In consequence, he delights in all seriousness in an, as he thinks, elevated style which, however, due to the frequent incongruence of vocabulary, register, and grammar, cannot be but amusing to the discerning reader. Yet at the same time his linguistic endeavours are evaluated more benignly by a positively sketched focaliser in

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<sup>23</sup> Biggers, *Black Camel*, 63; subsequently referred to parenthetically as BC.

The House Without a Key: “Chan was a student of English; he dragged his words painfully from the poets; he was careful to use nothing that savored of ‘pidgin.’” (HK, 201)

Yet although Chan projects an Americanised identity, the novels make quite clear that, as an immigrant, he lives between cultures and seeks to reconcile them with one another. Like many immigrants, he is rather conservative with respect to the culture of his adopted country, and while he wants his children to grow up as Americans, he is highly sceptical towards the popular culture which shapes them. It is, as he believes, a symptom of degeneration which articulates itself particularly in linguistic negligence.

The experiences of immigrant life are variously dealt with in Biggers’ novels. For instance, when in *The House Without a Key* Chan’s cousin is described as “attired in the extreme of college-cut clothes; he was an American and he emphasized the fact.” (HK, 156) In *The Black Camel*, Chan’s oldest son Henry – “Number One Son”, as would be the tired cliché in the films – behaves similarly: “‘Well, what’s the dope?’ went on Henry, who had been Americanized to a rather painful extent. ‘When do you grab the guilty party, and what’s his name?’” The use of colloquialisms, an aberration from the language of the English poets so highly valued by Chan, makes clear to him not only that the second generation in the country inexorably alienates itself from the first but that the reality of the country of which he himself has an imaginary and idealised conception is subject to change: “Charlie again looked at him, and sighed. These children were his link with the future – what sort of future, he often wondered.” (BC, 134)

Chan’s thoughts about his cultural positioning in a continuously changing world in which traditions and progress frequently clash are anything but manifestations of a mere exoticism. Rather, they are serious reflections on the problems of cultural contact and, once again, an example of the cultural relativism which intermittently surfaces in Biggers’ novels:

He went out and got his car, and as he drove down the hill he thought about his children. He had always been proud of the fact that they were all American citizens. But, perhaps because of this very fact, they seemed to be growing away from him – the gulf widened daily. They made no effort to remember the precepts and the codes; they spoke the English language in a manner that grated on Charlie’s sensitive ear.

He passed the Chinese cemetery, with its odd headstones scattered down the sloping hillside. There lay his mother, whom he had brought from China to spend her last years in the house on Punchbowl Hill. What would she think if she could see her descendants now: see Henry in his dapper clothes; see Rose, brisk and efficient, planning to go to a university on the mainland in the autumn; hear Evelyn speaking that shabby, out-moded slang she picked up on the school grounds? His mother would not have approved, Charlie knew. She would have mourned for the old ways, the old customs. He mourned for them himself – but there was nothing he could do about it. (BC, 136)

Although passages like this are rather rare, they still reveal a private dimension which gives Chan his peculiar character. They are also examples of what appears to be a perhaps unexpectedly sensitive external view on the ethnic other. However, ‘cross-ethnic’ writing is still frequently considered inappropriate,<sup>24</sup> and most recent ethnic crime fiction follows the politically correct and approved pattern.

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In African American literature it was especially Chester Himes – black and a convicted felon and therefore with the best, if slightly scandalous, credentials – who elaborated with his

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<sup>24</sup> See, e.g., Cohen, “Detective as Other”, 150 and, if in a different context, Meyer, *Literature and Ethnic Discrimination*, 137.

Harlem novels of the 1950s and 1960s on the project of African American crime fiction. Indeed, prior to the ‘re-discovery’ of Fisher’s *The Conjure Man Dies* and of the even earlier serialisations of Hopkins’s and Bruce’s, Himes was frequently considered to be the founder of black detective fiction.<sup>25</sup> This was due to no small degree to the fact that in his novels about the black Harlem policemen Grave Digger Jones and Coffin Ed Johnson, Himes was highly critical of society and ideology and obviously quite deliberately ‘wrote back’ against established conventions by systematically disappointing the expectations of his readers.

What connects Himes with the earlier African American writers no less than, for instance, with Walter Mosley, who may well have become one of the most successful writers of crime fiction of all times and who, significantly, has brought with *Easy Rawlins* the black detective into the mainstream, is their active interest in the human rights movement and their efforts to promote the emancipation of Americans of African descent also with literary means.

Walter Mosley blends in his *Easy Rawlins* novels the genres of the detective novel and of historical fiction. Their setting is the Watts neighbourhood in Los Angeles. Initially predominantly Latino, Watts turned increasingly into a black neighbourhood and achieved sad notoriety in the 1960s through violent race riots. Beginning in 1948 with *Devil in a Blue Dress*, which appeared in 1990 and in which Mosley introduces the figure of Ezekiel “Easy” Rawlins, the novels in this series successively unravel from an inside perspective the postwar history of blacks in the US – so far into the late 1960s.

The first scene in *Devil in a Blue Dress* is a deliberate allusion to Raymond Chandler’s classic *Farewell, My Lovely* (1940) in which the character of the ‘hard-boiled’ private eye Philip Marlowe was featured for the second time. With his first novel, Mosley

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<sup>25</sup> For a critical overview, see, e.g., Soitos, *Blues Detective*, chapter 5.

thus not only claims to continue the tradition of the genre which had been decisively shaped by Chandler. At the same time, he indicates with his re-‘vision’ of Chandler’s first chapter a change in perspective which inverts the ‘white’ gaze on ‘the’ blacks and turns the white into the object of the gaze instead.

Chandler’s novel begins with a description of the setting which already includes a social comment: “It was one of the mixed blocks over on Central Avenue, the blocks that are not yet all negro.”<sup>26</sup> Subsequently Marlowe describes how he enters – not entirely of his own volition – a black bar in the company of a gigantic white man. The two whites are immediately identified as intruders, but the point of view from which this incident is described is still that of the whites: “There was a sudden silence .... Heads turned slowly and the eyes in them glistened and stared in the dead alien silence of another race.” (FML, 10) The mutual strangeness does not permit any contact and the whites are asked to leave the bar in Chandler’s rendition of a black accent: “No white folks, brother. Jes’ fo’ the coloured people. I’s sorry.” (FML, 11) When the encounter turns violent and the black owner of the bar is murdered, its patrons vanish like silent “shadows” (a derogatory term for African Americans) and the frightened bar tender rolls the whites of his eyes (see FML, 12, 13). Chandler’s ‘local colour’ is clearly informed by racist stereotypes, which are also sustained through other disparaging terms: “smokes”, “shines”, “nigger” and “dinge” (FML, 8, 9). In the whole of the novel, these are, however, to some extent qualified through Marlowe’s cynical perspective who avoids their use.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Chandler, *Farewell, My Lovely*, 7; subsequently referred to parenthetically as FML.

<sup>27</sup> For Chandler’s perceptive description of the Central Avenue district of Los Angeles and his appreciation by Chester Himes, see Skinner, *Two Guns from Harlem*, 44, who nevertheless also suggests a more negative evaluation of the white writer as unsympathetic.



The first sentence in Mosley's *Devil in a Blue Dress* reverses Marlowe's point of view: "I was surprised to see a white man walk into Joppy's bar."<sup>28</sup> Although it does not come to fisticuffs and bloody murder here, the white man's intrusion into the black space is no less fraught – DeWitt Albright embodies a subliminal cold and cruel violence which the first-person narrator does not fail to notice and which subsequently is repeatedly emphasised. Albright turns into an existential threat to Easy. He can escape this threat only by becoming himself active and, in various ways, guilty. That violence determines the everyday life of the black community in many ways is repeatedly shown in Mosley's novel. At the same time this violence is correlated with the historical conditions of the confrontation of black and white. It is therefore hardly surprising that Easy is apprehensive when he encounters on this first day of his adventure not only DeWitt Albright, who is 'white' in name, sartorially, and in skin colour, but also two other whites – this bodes no good.

In *Farewell, My Lovely*, Marlowe observes the colossal Moose Malloy gazing from the street at the bar on the first floor and finally finding his way up through the swinging saloon doors. Even before the doors have stopped moving they are violently pushed open again:

Something sailed across the sidewalk and landed in the gutter between two parked cars. It landed on its hands and knees and made a high keening noise like a cornered rat. It got up slowly, retrieved a hat and stepped back on to the sidewalk. It was a thin, narrow-shouldered brown youth in a lilac coloured suit and a carnation. It had slick black hair. It kept its mouth open and whined for a moment. People stared at it vaguely. Then it settled

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<sup>28</sup> Mosley, *Devil in a Blue Dress*, 1; subsequently referred to parenthetically as DBD.

its hat jauntily, sidled over to the wall and walked silently splay-footed off along the block. (FML, 8)

“Something” – it hardly needs any more words to illustrate the dehumanisation which Marlowe’s account reveals. Mosley, it seems to me, deliberately alludes to this snapshot-like episode in that once again he inverts the perspective when Easy recounts: “The streets were especially dark and empty. Central Avenue was like a giant black alley and I felt like a small rat, hugging the corners and looking out for cats.” (DBD, 76). Yet at the same time Mosley also challenges the predictable connotations of the identification of blacks with rodents. Like Chandler describes the miserable young African American – resembling a rat, small and flamboyantly dressed – so does Easy describe, down to the colour of his suit, in a kind of *signifyin’* (the inversion of white signification) his friend Raymond “Mouse” Alexander, who is a ruthless killer and the most dangerous man known to Easy (DBD, 32, 48, 72, and 149).

For Mosley – like for many African American authors – the line between black and white and its apparent fluidity is a central concern. The change of the point of view just described is an example of this no less than the plot of *Devil in a Blue Dress* as a whole and the construction of the character of Easy Rawlins in particular. The devil in a blue dress is the supposedly white Daphne Monet whom Easy is trying to find for Albright.

Some murders later, it emerges that Daphne’s real name is Ruby and that she is ‘black’ – although to look at her no-one would notice. That is to say, she is turned into a black woman according to racist criteria from the outside and is denied the liberty of leading the ‘white’ life she craves and feels entitled to. Her desperate attempt to evade this heteronomy leads into catastrophe. It is the badman Mouse who recognises the complex mechanism and who opens Easy’s eyes. Because, for all his assiduous interest in culture and education, Easy is blind to the facts:

“You just like Ruby,” Mouse said.

“What you say?”

“She wanna be white. All them years people be tellin’ her how she light-skinned and beautiful but all the time she knows that she can’t have what white people have. So she pretend and then she lose it all. She can love a white man but all he can love is the white girl he think she is.”

“What’s that got to do with me?”

“That’s just like you, Easy. You learn stuff and you be thinkin’ that what’s right fo’ them is right fo’ you. She look like she white and you think like you white. But brother you don’t know that you both poor niggers. And a nigger ain’t never gonna be happy ’less he accept what he is.” (DBD, 205)

The phenomenon of the so-called passing (to be able to pass as white) and the external conflicts resulting from it are the focus of Mosley’s interest also in the ninth novel of his Easy Rawlins series, *Little Scarlet* (2004). Even more conspicuously than in his earlier novels, these conflicts are linked here with the historical confrontation of black and white. The individual crime – incidentally, for the first time in Mosley’s Easy Rawlins novels the murderer is a serial killer – is shown in various ways to be the result of social conditions and, more significantly, even turns into a symbol of the condition of the suppressed African American minority. For against the background of the bloody 1965 race riots, with which the murders are correlated, Mosley illuminates those constraints which thwart any normal development and which inescapably lead to moral deformation.

In the course of his investigation Easy finds out that the murderer is a black down-and-out who kills black women who associate with white men or men who pass as white. He

finds out that the murderer's rage and hate originate in his childhood. Both of his parents were so light-skinned that they passed as white. The boy's darker skin made him a threat – he was disowned and passed off as the maid's son. Frequent humiliations and his mother's continuous reproach made him flee his parents's house and lead a life in the streets even as a child. Easy succeeds in exposing the mother's black identity, who had long since been left by the boy's father and who is now married as a 'white' woman to a 'genuinely' white man. Easy forces a confrontation during which the novel's central motives emerge:

She was still wearing that gay dress and she'd added a brunette wig. There was enough powder on her face to bake bread and her lips looked like they were painted with red nail polish. Rather than trying to be a white woman, she seemed like she was attempting to pass as a member of a lost race of clowns.<sup>29</sup>

Undignified, ridiculous, but also pitiable; the woman is not even aware of her great guilt, or represses it, just like she denies her own black identity and her son. The mask which she dons – arguably a reference to Frantz Fanon's emancipatory text about the mimicry of ethnic minorities, *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) – cannot stand up to Easy's critical scrutiny:

For me it was her eyes. They opened wide at the accusation I leveled, wide and brown and down-home. She had the colored curse in her veins. I was sure that she saw it in the mirror every morning before dousing herself with powders and lightening creams, before she put on her wig and gloves and hat. (LS, 270–1)

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<sup>29</sup> Mosley, *Little Scarlet*, 268; subsequently referred to parenthetically as LS.

What Easy sees in her is self-hate. And hers is not a singular case. Rather, self-hate is a well-known phenomenon which was first described in the Jewish context,<sup>30</sup> but which applies no less to the African American minority:

It wasn't the first time I had met someone like her. And I didn't hate her for hating herself. If everybody in the world despises and hates you, sees your features as ugly and simian, makes jokes about your ways of talking, calls you stupid and beneath contempt; if you have no history, no heroes, and no future where a hero might lead, then you might begin to hate yourself, your face and features, your parents, and even your child. It could all happen and you would never even know it. And then one hot summer's night you just erupt and go burning and shooting and nobody seems to know why. (LS, 271)

Hate and uncontrollable rage, against oneself and against those which are responsible for the constraints which lead with almost tragic inevitability to the profound moral deformation which surfaces on different levels in the actions of the murderer, of his parents and of the rioters, drunk with power, this hate and rage which have an inexorable hold also on Easy's innermost being – and this from the very first novel in the series – are shown to be in Mosley's novels the immovable parameters of black existence in America. Just as in the novels of Chester Himes before him.

In view of the social constraints exacted by segregation, the motivation of the culpable parents seems so simple and banal that the outrageousness not only of their actions, but also of the very constraints of which they were the result, is emphasised even more acutely: “They thought we were white and we didn't set them straight. But we could tell

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<sup>30</sup> See, e.g., Gilman, *Jewish Self-Hatred*.

about each other. It wasn't so wrong. We just wanted to go ahead. We wanted to work together. We bought a house." (LS, 272)

As in *Devil in a Blue Dress*, the real crime, or so it seems, is black self-effacement and the constraints from which it originates. In *Little Scarlet* a new dimension is added in that a collective level is explored which exhibits the same internal tensions as the individual who destroys himself and others. Black turns against black and although the novel evokes time and again a new black self-confidence, this has its reverse in the new domestication, the utilisation, and the complicity of blacks in the perpetuation of the existing asymmetric power relation.

Easy who officially works as caretaker at a school relates an example of this when he describes how he was prevented during the riots by a black sentry of the National Guard to enter the school's grounds. The guardsman lets him pass only after the intervention of a white officer, and even then only reluctantly:

I smiled at my brother. He scowled at me before standing aside.

And there I was again, caught in the contradictions brought to the surface by the riots.

The sentry took his job seriously. Who was the enemy? Black people. Even though he was colored himself it was his job to bar our entry and he intended to keep us out. Even though I did not know it at the time, that was the beginning of the breakup of our community. It was the first time you could see that there was another side to be on. If you identified with white people, you had a place where you were welcomed in. (LS, 81)

As soon as the officer has ascertained that Easy takes the right path, he turns away, "leaving the sentry and me", as Easy realises, "at the opposite ends of a struggle that neither one of us had asked for." (LS, 81)

The internal conflict, the breaking-apart of the black community, whose beginnings Easy perceives here in retrospect, determines in multiple variations, ranging from the experience of self-hate to the bloody riots, both African American individuals and the African American collective in Mosley's novel. Easy himself enters an un-'easy' alliance with Detective Melvin Suggs to collect evidence against the black murderer. With the exception of a few Jewish figures, Suggs is one of the few whites in the half-Jewish Mosley's novels who behave with some normality towards Easy and who develop an awareness of the injustice against which the riots in *Little Scarlet* are directed. And although Easy works only infrequently alongside Suggs they, like Fisher's detectives, rely entirely on each other to solve the multitude of serial murders in this novel.

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Yet another, if very different, example of the construction of 'black' ethnic identities in crime fiction is James McClure's *The Gooseberry Fool* which appeared in 1974 and which deals with the apartheid regime in South Africa. In this novel, also part of a series, McClure, who was white and emigrated in 1965 from South Africa to the UK, has the team of the (white) Afrikaner Lieutenant Tromp Kramer and his Bantu sergeant Mickey Zondi investigate the murder of a white man.

McClure's novel is a multi-layered representation of complex power relationships in apartheid South Africa of which the novel's first publication in the UK is itself a part. Under South African censorship, repeatedly referred to in the novel,<sup>31</sup> this text could not have been published.

Structurally, *The Gooseberry Fool* follows a pattern of successive new and unexpected insights or developments driving not only the action and changing the perspective

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<sup>31</sup> See, e.g., McClure, *Gooseberry Fool*, 79; subsequently referred to parenthetically as GF.

on the events, but more particularly continuously shifting the perspective on the relation between black and white. The murder victim is white, and of course it is the black house boy who is initially suspected of the deed. “Inescapably, boringly, the wog was indeed the most likely candidate”, Kramer, too, reflects:

To begin with, he had the wog mentality. Kramer did not ascribe to it a mystique capable of heinous crime totally without provocation, as Van der Poel undoubtedly did, but he conceded that here you had a thinking process – or rather, form of reaction – unlike his own. He had seen a word in English-language newspapers that described it well: overkill. And overkill there was in the shantytowns and alleyways of Trekkersburg – with the country as a whole, its population 22 million, racking up 6,500 murders a year. The only thing that made sense of it was to imagine that a small incident was the last straw on the camel’s back. That inside every wog was this big sense of outrage and all you needed to do was add a touch more and the whole lot went up. (GF, 17)

The explosive socio-psychological dynamics of which Kramer is very much aware seem to be comparable to those described by Mosley in *Little Scarlet*. The ethical dimension of Kramer’s insight, actually a moral imperative, is not, however, sounded by him in any more detail. His character is too complex to be pressed into a simple binary grid and McClure succeeds in his novel in never becoming trite, nor does he ever succumb to a simplifying black-and-white world view. Both Kramer and Zondi are shaped with internal contradictions by their cultural environments and by the social and political tensions in their country.

Kramer accepts the given conditions; time and again he uses as a matter of course derogative terms for the black other, like “wog” and “coon” (GF, 7, 62). And although something almost like a professional friendship joins him with Zondi, he is still wary of being



called a “Kaffir lover” (GF, 97).<sup>32</sup> Yet obviously, Kramer experiences the situation as paradoxical and frequently takes refuge in blatant cynicism. “I’ll have the chocolate one”, he quips, when he has Zondi buy some ice cream for the two of them: “Can’t have you turning into a bloody cannibal or something.” (GF, 8)

But in some ways this is exactly what Zondi has been turned into – not by Kramer, but by the apartheid system. For Zondi – and again there are some parallels to Mosley – has turned into the dogsbody of the system. When his investigation leads him to a mission school he remembers his own childhood in such an institution:

There the best dreams of his life had been dreamed; all you had to do, the white nuns had said, was learn your lessons well and then, when you grew up, you could be anything you wanted to be. They had been wrong, those stupid, kind women, who believed all men were brothers, totally wrong, but Zondi still could not feel bitter. Unlike his classmate Matthew Mslope, who had gone back with a mob to burn, pillage, and rape. But Matthew had been wrong, too, and Zondi had arrested him, had him hanged. Which was how he met the lieutenant. And how two wrongs could make a right, whatever Sister Therese had said. (GF, 43)

Pressurised by the apartheid system, Zondi has become a collaborator and McClure indicates an internal conflict which is comparable to that described by Mosley: Although objectively it is without doubt justified to chase the criminal, the motives for the crime – as in Mosley’s novels – are really quite understandable.

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<sup>32</sup> See, e.g.: “I know what you were wanting to do: to give your little black friend some help on the Swart case.” “Black what, sir?” (GF, 97)

Zondi's behaviour is the product of the paternalistic relationship between white and black which has been denounced by postcolonial criticism. "Like bloody children they are, always wanting you to help them" (GF, 21), a racist colleague of Kramer's complains about Zondi. Kramer, however, knows that Zondi is fully able to act responsibly, and trusts him – not without possible consequences for his own professional future. The effectiveness of the paternalistic structures, in no way intended by Kramer, is demonstrated by Zondi's reaction to his attestation of confidence. Assigned to chase the supposedly fugitive house boy, Zondi decides to forego any outside help: "the basic reason behind his reluctance to involve others rested on the fact that being allowed the initiative was a true compliment – one he intended repaying with a nice neck for the gallows." (GF, 42)

Zondi's search is made more difficult by the fact that the family of the runaway was recently subject to forced resettlement, a violent military operation which is described by McClure in much critical detail. Zondi finally manages to confront the fugitive. But due to his rash course of action in the resettlement camp he jeopardises the inmates' very existence by inadvertently permitting the starving children to plunder the meagre provisions. On the return journey he soon realises that the captive is innocent. McClure once again shifts the perspective in that it emerges that the young man 'absconded' only to support his resettled family. Forced from the rough road by another car, Zondi crashes and the manacled captive dies. He is another innocent victim of the white hegemony, but also of the Bantu sergeant's collaboration who is himself hospitalised after the accident.

In the meantime it emerges that the Bureau of State Security (BOSS) is involved in the case and has sabotaged Kramer's and Zondi's investigation to protect the identity of the murder victim who had infiltrated a group of dissidents as an informer. Kramer finds out about this and a confrontation with members of BOSS ensues. Finally, however, it is Zondi – released from hospital – who solves the case. In a lucky mixture of chance and deduction he

reveals the informer to have been a blackmailer on the side who was killed by one of his victims.

The predominant issues addressed in *The Gooseberry Fool* are the paranoia of a totalitarian state founded on the principles of an inhumane segregation and, on various levels, the corruption and iniquity of the system. A multitude of black characters are introduced in different contexts, all of which are contaminated by the fraught relationship between black and white. Cultural difference is also an issue which is explored on different levels, although not always unbiased. Thus Zondi's interrogation methods, relying on traditional gender roles of the black population, must appear dubious to the liberal reader, to say the least: "Zondi had a way with women – and with a spare fan belt, meaningfully slapped against the trouser leg." (GF, 19) And later: "Zondi moved in a step closer, having exchanged the fan belt for an insect spray with greater potential." (GF, 20) Conversely, however, the black physician Dr Mtembu challenges Kramer's white supremacy. "Kramer was not used to having a wog address him in such a tone, still less to hearing one speak proper English and with an English accent, too. The sheer novelty won him over." (GF, 135) What the novel does not make clear, and this may be one of its weaknesses, is that European or white cultural hegemony is confirmed by the physician's mimicry. A similar stereotype finds expression when Kramer is turned into a focaliser for the description of the house of Zondi and his wife Miriam in a segregated township:

This particular house was distinguished by its consummate neatness, and the fact that Miriam, who had once been maid to a very rich lady, was not without taste. Kramer was very taken by the newspaper pattern she had scissored to fringe the shelves of her sideboard, and by the lines she had scored to simulate planking in the stamped earth floor. (GF, 129)

What distinguishes the interior of this particular house from others of its kind is the conformity with western conceptions of hygiene and aesthetics. The attractiveness of the living space which has been carved out by Zondi and Miriam against all odds and their aspiration to western standards distinguish these characters no less than Dr Mtembu, but at the same time reveal them to be the products of the contact with a hegemonic culture.

The novel ends on an ironic inversion. Dr Mtembu had confronted Kramer with the well-known quotation from Juvenal's satires: "Quis custodiet ipsos custodies?" (GF, 135) Kramer, however, not knowledgeable in ancient lore, mistakes the quote for an invective. He hears "Piss" instead of "Quis". Enlightened by the physician as to the meaning of the quote – "Who shall guard the guard?" – he imparts his new wisdom at the end of the novel in mutilated form to Zondi whose performance he acknowledges at the same time: "If it wasn't for you, Zondi, old son, then quis pus custard et?" (GF, 192) The relationship between black and white – as in Mosley, but beyond Fisher – is thus newly defined as one of co-operation and mutual monitoring.

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Finally, there is one last example of the construction of ethnic identities in crime fiction I would like to discuss: Patrick Neate's 2005 novel *City of Tiny Lights*.<sup>33</sup> Neate is a white British writer who became well-known for several 'serious' novels and a literary documentary of hip hop culture. In *City of Tiny Lights* he, like Mosley, continues the private eye tradition of Raymond Chandler. His investigator is Tommy Akhtar, "Paki-immigrant

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<sup>33</sup> Neate also wrote the screenplay for the BBC TV adaptation of his novel, directed by Pete Travis and released in 2016.

Ugandan-Indian Englishman”,<sup>34</sup> as the first-person narrator describes himself. Retained to find a missing prostitute, the case, which soon converges with the murder of a Member of Parliament and the threat of pseudo-fundamentalist terrorists, leads him through multicultural London. That Tommy’s investigation is not limited to one particular ethnic community of which he himself is a part, distinguishes Neate’s novel significantly from most other ethnic detective novels.<sup>35</sup>

City of Tiny Lights is complex and many-layered, peppered with literary allusions and an expression of the conviction that cricket is an allegory for life or, as Tommy’s eccentric father Farzad has it: “You can learn everything you need to know about life from a game of cricket.” (CTL, 4) In fact, cricket, in conjunction with repeated references to postcolonial trends, is not only turned into a symbol of the multicultural reality of the first decade of the twenty-first century but also of the ever-increasing loss of British colonial hegemony within this multicultural diversity: “The point is that when Lara creamed England’s finest to all points Antigua in ’94, he crossed an invisible line of the imagination, and when it had been crossed once, it was a whole lot easier to cross it again.” (CTL, 304) The Empire – to adapt Salman Rushdie’s well-known phrase<sup>36</sup> – bats back.

Tommy is himself a part of his multicultural environment. His past, like that of his family – the immigrants’ lot and especially the family’s fragmentation after his mother’s

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<sup>34</sup> Neate, *City of Tiny Lights*, 122; subsequently referred to parenthetically as CTL.

<sup>35</sup> Tommy, too, is encumbered by prejudice and racism, and he – as Charlie Chan does – also reflects on his immigrant status: “I know the story off by heart. I should do. I’ve lived it. But to me it’s just a story” (CTL, 15). He nevertheless succeeds in gaining access wherever he wants.

<sup>36</sup> See Rushdie, “Empire Writes Back”, 8.

death – turn into central elements of the story and serve not least also to explain the events in which Neate’s novel culminates. His mother’s death, for which Tommy feels responsible because he did not, as an adolescent, recognise the heart attack and failed to call an ambulance, leads to his brother Gundappa’s losing himself in a world of gang war-fare and hate. Here, too, the indefinable rage, broached in Mosley’s and McClure’s novels, resurfaces. While Farzad, Tommy’s father, turns into a temporarily sought-after ‘postcolonial’ artist, Tommy metamorphoses into a religious fundamentalist who fights in Afghanistan with the Mujaheddin against the Soviets. About these experiences he can later talk only in the third person: “He feels like he’s describing someone else.” (CTL, 41)

Returned from Afghanistan, disenchanted, and initially hardly capable of normal emotions, his purpose in life is limited to the essentials: his cynicism, articulated in an entirely untinged and idiomatic cockney slang, his friends Turk and Benny (Wild Turkey Bourbon and Benson and Hedges cigarettes) and long cricket video nights with Farzad and his father’s friend Trinidad Pete.

Tommy succeeds early on in finding the missing prostitute, [sexyrussian.com](http://sexyrussian.com). But doing so, he stumbles into a conspiracy between CIA, MI5, and a pseudo-fundamentalist terrorist, Al-Dubayan. The latter, as Farzad has it, “represents a phenomenon that is altogether more modern and, indeed, dangerous. ... he’s an opportunist .... You know I am not a religious man. Nonetheless, I don’t like this term ‘religious fundamentalism’. It is surely tautologous, is it not? If you’re religious, you’re a fundamentalist and that is that.” (CTL, 158) But Farzad’s thoughts go further than that. “Therefore”, he continues,

I dislike the way the establishment and the celebrated fourth estate in this country – my country – use the word ‘fundamentalism’ when their meaning is ‘fanaticism’. It is yet another example of every Tom, Dick and Harry playing silly buggers with the English

language. Fundamentalism is, after all, inherently rational within the parameters of a closed belief system. Ipso facto, if you want to imply a person is irrational or misguided, then they are not fundamentalist but fanatic. ... What is more, since fundamentalism (albeit as it is currently misapprehended) is always associated with religion, it excuses us Godless British citizens from any reverse accusations. But isn't our democratically elected government (relatively speaking) guilty of democratic fundamentalism? (CTL, 158–9)

Tommy, whose investigation worries MI5 and CIA, is interrogated because of his past as Mujaheddin and is forced to prove his loyalty by collaborating with both agencies. His retrospective narrative reveals the alarmingly reductive world view of his opposites which is well suited to confirm Farzad's scepticism towards practised 'fundamentalist' democracy:

[W]ould it have been better to draw attention to their overt equation of religion with ethnicity or their apparent incomprehension of a secular state? ...

Maybe I could have explained Farzad's "decision" to come to the UK with an idiot's guide to Idi Amin. Maybe I could have explained it with reference to half a millennium of European colonianism in Africa and the by-products thereof. ... Perhaps I could have hypothesized that a conception of British patriotism depends on a conception of what it means to be British. Perhaps I could have just told them that it wasn't so much rich as downright unpalatable to have my patriotism questioned by a foreigner (albeit one, ironically, of immigrant extraction himself – as if there's another kind of Yank). (CTL, 212)

After his release Tommy continues his investigation with the help of Av, an adolescent Pakistani, whose vocabulary is severely impaired – “F\_\_\_, man. I mean, f\_\_\_!” (CTL, 173) is a typical example of his eloquence. To Tommy, Av seems well suited to infiltrate the pseudo-fundamentalist terror cell, precisely because he appears to be typical of the disenfranchised immigrant youth. While on his undercover mission, Av, like other members of the group, unwittingly carries a bomb onto the tube. His can be defused in time, but other explosives demand a bloody toll in the city.

Published on 30 June 2005, only days before the London bombings, Neate disturbingly anticipates this series of attacks in his novel. Even more disturbing, however, is the way in which the attacks are instrumentalised intentionally by the secret services for the polarisation of the population, because in this respect, too, reality has outrun fiction. It is explained to Tommy:

We are in a war situation. We are fortunate that much of this war is currently being fought abroad. But we are not so fortunate that this has led to increasing apathy and even, shall we say, negative enthusiasm among sections of the media, government and, indeed, population at large. Nonetheless the dangers here at home are, as you and I know, just as real and it is of paramount importance that we acknowledge this and allocate adequate resources to address the developing situation. (CTL, 294)

It is Farzad, to whom Neate attributes an apt quote in this context (CTL, 324). He too recites, like Dr Mtembu and Kramer in McClure’s *The Gooseberry Fool* before him, the familiar admonition from Juvenal’s satires: “Sed quis custodiet ipsos custodes?” The analogy may be entirely fortuitous. Still, it seems significant to me. While McClure openly criticises a dictatorial and paranoid political system, Neate’s representation of a multicultural London,



which is subject to the fear of terror attacks, is obviously indicative of an uncertainty which originates in the emergence of a new variant of stereotyping according to ethnic-religious criteria which trails in its wake a similar paranoia and similar structures of surveillance.

But Neate's novel is not a document of resignation. Time and again established stereotypes are undermined in unexpected ways. When Tommy, in the days after the attacks, tries to hail a taxi it takes several attempts until he finds a driver who is willing to pick up the 'Paki'.

The geezer who eventually picked me up looked unreconstructed, serious. From the back seat, his number-two cut and the folds of skin that rolled on up his neck smacked British bulldog. He had yesterday's Standard on the dashboard. The headline read, "Terror Threat Strangles Capital". I knew he'd have something to say. I sat back and thought of England.

But actually:

He gave me his world-view. So much for my assumptions. He blamed the media. He blamed the government. He was my kind of guy. ...

When he let me out we shook hands. He waved his paper at me. He said, "I tell my boy you can't judge a book by its cover but look what I'm up against, know what I mean?" I felt guilty and tipped 20 per cent. We bonded patriotic. (CTL, 297–8)

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So far I have largely skirted the question of the author's ethnic identity. The question is a hot iron; it is highly political and taboos lurk far and wide. One may remember in a somewhat

different context the so-called Wilkomirski affair which culminated in an impressive display of censorship when it was discovered that the childhood memories of the self-styled Holocaust survivor were fictitious and the remaining copies of the previously best-selling novel were eventually removed from the shelves of bookshops in the German-speaking countries.<sup>37</sup>

Within the various genres of crime fiction the question of the author's ethnic identity is obviously also relevant. And it is so, most blatantly, precisely when the construction of ethnic identities is at issue. Of course it could be argued, after the lamentable demise of the author proclaimed by Roland Barthes, that the author's ethnic descent was irrelevant for the reading of his or her work.<sup>38</sup> But then, Michel Foucault already observed that the author as a function of discourse is a complex entity, a projection of our encounter with a text, which in fact contributes significantly to the configuration of the text between author and reader.<sup>39</sup> More recently, the author has therefore been resurrected less as a 'person' than rather as an 'icon'. Particularly in popular fiction, and more especially perhaps in ethnic crime fiction, the author icon and the associations and expectations it evokes seem to be significant – not least because the icon of the ethnic author seems to promise authenticity, the positioning of the author on the 'right' side of the power relationship, and thus also the legitimacy of the texts' subversiveness.

Mosley's 'authenticity' is rarely questioned, nor is Fisher's. McClure was at least dissident and an emigrant who was praised for his insights into the social mechanisms of a

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<sup>37</sup> See, e.g., Maechler, *Wilkomirski Affair*, 296.

<sup>38</sup> See Barthes, "Death of the Author", 142–8.

<sup>39</sup> See Foucault, "What Is an Author?", 205–22.

“troubled society”.<sup>40</sup> Neate’s novel, in which the persona of the Indian-Ugandan-Pakistani Englishman is introduced completely consistent as first-person narrator, has an almost ‘trans-ethnic’ quality.<sup>41</sup> In addition, Tommy himself is anything but politically correct and he is so obviously on purpose. One example will suffice: “When a tom pouts, you know about it; a black tom especially. You could have thrown her at a window and that mouth would’ve stuck fast.” (CTL, 109) Biggers has become, to some extent at least, the victim of the success of the series of films modelled on his Chinese detective and abounding with ethnic stereotypes which in the context of the original novels gain another, more pluralistic, dimension.

All of the novels discussed in this article have an unmistakably subversive potential in that they write, in the terms of postcolonial theory, as Mosley does, a (hi)story of the suppressed minority from the margins, or – as in the texts of McClure and Neate – in that they articulate a parallel perception to systemic constraints which challenge the political, social and cultural hegemony of the majority or – in South Africa – of the minority. The construction of ethnic identities becomes the vehicle of this subversion because these identities are the products and the catalysts of the conflict negotiated in literature – both in fiction and in reality.

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<sup>40</sup> Macdonald and Macdonald, “Ethnic Detectives in Popular Fiction”, 65.

<sup>41</sup> The same approach informs also the author’s first two novels, see Neate’s *Msungu Jim* (2000) and *Twelve Bar Blues* (2001).

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