

# Racination and ratiocination: post-colonial crime

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Crime fiction is currently one of the most globalized, most popular, and biggest-selling of commercial genres, but there has been almost no attempt to study it in relation to other kinds of post-colonial literature. There is no bibliography of crime writers as 'post-colonial', and no attempt to generalize about a body of fiction. This paper is a brief extract from work in progress, based on the books of over fifty Anglophone or Francophone authors who might be categorized as 'post-colonial' by birth or residence. I test post-colonial theory against crime fiction, to argue that strong generic conventions call into question some of that theory's received ideas. I consider two linked problems: first, so-called 'colonial mimicry' and its obverse, 'ventriloquism', because it seems to me a wrong turning in 20th-century criticism; and, second, the demand for new literatures which would create 'national identities'. I argue that 'mimicry' makes no sense in the context of a strong popular genre, and that accusations of 'colonial mimicry' reinscribe the asymmetries of judgement they appear to attack. The possibility of imagined geopolitical units as identity-forming, especially in genres which are informed by social criticism, calls into question the demand for literature as a source of national identity.

crimine ab uno disce omnes ('from one crime know the nation')

Virgil, *Aeneid* II.65

## Introduction

Crime fiction is currently one of the most globalized, most popular, and biggest-selling of commercial genres, a genre whose domination by American exports I need not emphasize. What follows is work in progress, as I have found myself testing post-colonial theory, with its strong generic conventions, against

the detective novel in English and in French, as its practitioners and locations have multiplied across the globe. Staples of post-colonial discourse are whether post-colonialism should or can be defined by genealogy and geography; socio-political commitment and subject; nationality, gender or sexual orientation; race and class; or, more globally, by attitudes to imperialism. My focus is in some senses more oblique, more historical, and certainly more popular. When I started this project, what I thought I might find was the return of the repressed; that is, stealthy evidence of strong social and political commitment, the creation of national identity, in an evolving, but always recognizable, body of fiction in which a detective or private investigator solves a crime through intelligent interpretation of evidence. I thought the former colonies would offer a strong ‘cross channel’ contrast, because the French have always characterized *le polar* as a ‘*phénomène de gauche*’, whereas British writers have not. Post-colonial theory cannot mean much to this body of literature unless and until one has identified and hunted down often out-of-print books, and I shall merely report that my corpus – of writers – has recently passed 50, in English or French, and that although my methods are, perhaps necessarily, empirical. I believe, however, that it is already possible to reach certain conclusions.

Here, I have chosen two linked problems: first, so-called ‘colonial mimicry’ and its obverse, ‘ventriloquism’, because it seems to me a wrong turning in 20th-century criticism and, second, ‘national identity’, whether we can talk of the novelist’s creation of an imagined geopolitical unit as identity-forming (what I once called ‘land piety’) which links domestication of a once-exotic place with allegiance to the nation expressed as geography.<sup>1-3</sup> Both labels belong to a set of sophisticated critical positions which have themselves evolved considerably, but the labels survive to imply that colonized writers are in a position circumscribed by their experience of external rule, that their response will, or perhaps must, consciously or unconsciously, lead to particular, identifiable responses of resistance to the norms they believe themselves to be using. The link is important because it presupposes the immanence and pre-eminence of the nation state in everything we write, and insists upon the writer’s responsibility to nourish its image. The contradictions in the critical positions are so deep as to have out-lived any usefulness they may once have had: in a word, they beg the question they set out to examine.

### Un peu d’histoire

In popular detection we might want to distinguish macro- from micro-crime, the geo-political from the domestic. If the immediate engine of the domestic is driven by the local motives of desire and revenge, status and power, money and marriage, nonetheless distant murmurs of political perils and possibilities are never far away;

in multiple senses, globalization was criminal from the start. From their beginning in the rue Morgue, detective stories were aware of the wider world, which impinged not least in the exotic ambivalence of promise and threat – as, of course, it did in other genres of literature, especially the Boy's Own or Adventure varieties (Symon<sup>4</sup> was influential in this description). Exploration and conquest, trade and colonization, offered possibilities for *Wanderlust* and its near relations, power-lust, cupidity, and lust *tout court*. The outward force of exoticism remains with us, as does the inward pressure of colonized, formerly-colonized, or former colonizing migrants turning, or returning, to Europe, either in person or in fiction. There is a complex web of interrelatedness that amounts to a most impressive interdenominational literary and generic treasury of reference. Detective stories are remarkably meta-fictional about fiction's detectives. Cross-channel competition manifested itself immediately, when Poe's Chevalier Dupin pooh-poohed Vidocq, as Holmes or Father Brown would more or less politely refer to them both in turn, as then did Maurice LeBlanc's Arsène Lupin to Holmes; all this any history of crime fiction makes clear. Knowing nods or winks assume already-addicted readers, as aware of traditions as of key figures. Critical traditions differ in orientation and approach. Bibliographers and other compilers, as well as writers about crime fiction, mention colonized countries and peoples, but as exotic locations or background, not subjects unified by similar experiences; the critical discourses seldom overlap and there is, to my knowledge, only one collection of essays (concentrating on individual writers) which even begins to treat *The Post-Colonial Detective* as a category.<sup>5</sup> Just as critical work on detective fiction is prone to ignore, or even to forget, questions of national or ethnic origin, so also many national literary Companions or reference works either omit popular novelists altogether or notice crime fiction only in passing.<sup>6, 8, 9</sup> The discourse of detection is not that of post-colonial theory; for example, 'the ethnic detective' has meant somebody not from mainstream America.

There is every reason to extend analyses of the oft-cited post-colonial condition to this strong genre of popular fiction, because it inflects literary convention with local perspectives. It treats current social anxieties, ethnic, regional, and national; identities religious and sexual; even politics by other means. Its most successful detectives have often been praised as characteristic of their nations. The terms of post-colonial criticism themselves develop from earlier arguments about nationalism, and risk creating problems that resemble discussions of sincerity and authenticity, threatening a confusion between the message and the messenger. In the 50 years or so in which 'Commonwealth Literature' and '*la grande francophonie*' have evolved into 'post-colonial discourse', one area of contention has been that of preliminary definitions, based sometimes on genealogy, sometimes on hidden metaphors ('centre/margin'), but always presupposing the pre-eminence of the nation state, and almost always seeking political commitment

on the part of the writers of the ‘new literatures’, whose self-characterized identities, like their critics’, have tended to be left-leaning progressivist. In the United States, where concentration on a special area or expertise is now conventional, post-colonial emphasis on marginality might tempt us to bend our usual rules of inclusion for the sake of Tony Hillerman, recognizing that Hillerman invents (or ‘ventriloquizes’) his ‘marginal’ Navajo detectives.<sup>7</sup> Outside the US, it was a question whether such an imported genre would arise at all. Were it to emerge, one might hypothesize that the settings would constitute witness in which the post-colonial condition would write back to a perceived central tradition, resulting in hybridization. The experiences of urbanization, industrialization, increased mobility, and the necessary additive of institutionalized police and judiciary, would appear in national dress.

### Mimicry, Imitation, Participation

Authors learn to write crime fiction from reading it, going to the movies, and watching television. They begin by analysing a genre, then finding an area or approach suitable to their talents and saleable to publishers ever hungry for more series. I emphasize the commercial aspect from the outset, not only because it exercises such a strong determinant on what gets published, but also because sales are such a powerful attraction for people who might not otherwise be able to make much money. The aspiration for budding authors is to be picked up by a publisher with international distribution. Therefore, imitation with a difference is the key to success in a highly competitive – not to say over-subscribed – field. Definition and morphology bring their own problems: the Canadian Margarets, Millar and Doody, or the New Zealander Marsh, are just as much migrants or transnationals as James McClure, ‘Hugues Pagan’ or William Marshall. Their foreignness might well be thought to give them particular strengths, especially the courage to deploy stereotype. As I have indicated, focus on the author’s place of birth risks privileging the messenger over the message, ascribes authority to an old idea of sincerity and authenticity, to ‘witness’, and reinforces the traditional legal *jus soli* of citizenship. It is hard to think of the Golden Age’s Ngaio Marsh, born in New Zealand, as a transnational migrant ‘writing back to the centre’. But she was, and I come to think that some of the stereotyping in her work corresponds rather precisely to margin-to-centre satire. To speak of ‘colonial mimicry’ is to call the description ‘colonial mimicry’ into question.

Marsh’s day-job was as a theatre manager, and her detective inspector, Roderick Alleyn, takes his name from the Elizabethan actor, Edward Alleyn, who created Marlowe’s *Tamburlaine*, the source of Chandler’s Marlowe. Alleyn is a recognizable stereotype of a certain kind of Englishman. Crime fiction’s ‘ethnic detective’ may – or may not – be written by authors who belong to their hero’s

ethnicity, nationality, or gender. One of the benefits of the post-colonial approach has been greater consciousness of our own points of view, 'where we are coming from' in a literal sense. Hitherto, we have not thought of Inspector Alleyn as 'ethnic' or of Agatha Christie's Belgian Poirot as a problem of exoticism or asymmetry; where women authors are concerned, we take cross-dressing for granted, and we forget national dress. We would accuse Marsh of ventriloquizing neither component of English Man. Were I Belgian, I might have different views about Poirot than I do (in a longer essay I would want to discuss David Suchet's television Poirot). In more recent series, John Wyllie's Dr Quarshie, H. R. F. Keating's Inspector Ghote and Alexander McCall Smith's Precious Ramotswe all live in former colonies, exotic to their creators (Wyllie was born in India and moved to Canada, Smith in what was then Southern Rhodesia, and lives in Scotland). More puzzling, perhaps, is James McClure's cast, because Kramer is an Afrikaaner, Zondi is a Zulu, and characters are represented in English although they are speaking numerous languages within their own groups or between them. Aside from certain very basic speech markers, McClure (born in South Africa, lives in England) does not call much attention to his linguistic variety. Yet it is there. So are we to think of him as another in the long line of ventriloquists? Kramer was popular among South Africa's policemen, so apparently, like Hillerman among the Navajo, he is a successful work of imagination. We need to rethink the epithet, ventriloquist.

The expectation which inscribes authority within origins assumes the corollary that the 'colonized' writer, who observes from a 'marginal' position, sees differently from the 'central' (or 'metropolitan') writer. It is well to keep in mind Isaiah Berlin's warning about the assumed moral superiority of the underdog here, because there has been a frequent claim that the exogenic perspective *ipso facto* creates critical strength. In the 1960s, the period around Independence, in the face of unprecedented social change, the double face of commitment to nation-building emphasized acts of memory which preserved – or created – national histories which would help transcend regional, religious, or descent rivalries to bind new citizens through shared identities which reached back in familiar gestures of genealogical precedence and affirmation of cultural value. That, in the first generation, the pioneering novels were largely the work of high-status men taking themselves as allegories of national experience did not go unremarked. The stakes are different for the crime writer, whose social observations employ the personal and cultural rivalries which complicate plots and motivate characters, and whose moment is usually contemporary. The specificities of rootedness in a place at a time, usually the mean streets of a city, depend upon local and national institutions, because crime implies law and law-enforcement, whether institutional or customary. Education must be included, because the importance of crime fiction for children and young adults, especially in Africa, has been so little remarked.

In my book I shall include the initiative of the Macmillan Pacesetters series. These specificities also imply complex but moral negotiations between law and justice. I would hazard the generalization that that negotiation, between law or custom and justice, is one of mankind's universals. Another generalization is that all detectives are always passionate about their places, whether they be the Toronto of 1895 (Jennings) or the Algeria of the 1990s (Khadra). Insofar as there is necessary social observation, crime fiction is not so different from other kinds of novels: casts of characters span ethnic, religious, and gender distinctions; the usual questions of class or status and money are inflected by a geography in which the traditional urban orientation of crime writing may be in constant communication with a rural hinterland. The process of the case varies with the cultures of the place, ratiocination with racination.

Historians of the genre often isolate the world of Golden Age detective fiction as private, domestic, and pastoral, preferring the urban violence of the hard-boiled style attributed to Chandler and Hammett. The country-house murder mystery becomes emblematic of all that was cosy and snobbish about an imagined pre-war England or France, including an apparently limited cast. But the exotic was always knocking at the gate, and the barbarians were always already within, as common xenophobia and anti-semitism demonstrated. It is important to stress how endogenous the motives and movers were and how seldom the much-yearned-for passer-by was the guilty party. The violence was always endogenous, there were never islands or oases of calm tranquillity; that is also one of the lessons of pastoral. Nonetheless, geographical isolation, like the locked room, has been successfully transferred to different kinds of society, in very different countries. As a setting, it is not so different from more serious novels of closed societies, a kind of poor man's *Magic Mountain*. I evoke the pastoral deliberately, because the worldwide desire to locate a happier time before the incursions from outside, appears, *mutatis mutandis*, to be another universal. The complex experiences of colonization or imperial rule are among the most dramatic of watersheds. Accompanied by urbanization and industrialization (often, as in the arguments between Gandhi and Nehru, also from within) the modernization of many former colonial countries brought its own demands for literatures that would imagine and create a place in the sense of a new nation and new identity. Oddly, this returns us to some of the anxieties which marked the genre as it first developed its urgent need to find or construct a pattern which makes sense of otherwise arbitrary malfeasance: murder in a context of insecurity – the traffic in labour, prostitution, and drugs and international politics, including terrorism. Conrad's *Secret Agent* comes immediately to mind. With the possible exception of private or 'domestic' motivations (human interest or '*fait divers*' which centre on love, revenge, inheritance), in the contemporary novel all crime is potentially organized crime and all borders are permeable.

One must remark how quickly American, British, and French writers read and responded to innovation, from new kinds of periodical fiction to new kinds of subject. Because there were, from the start, few innovators and many participants, the analogy of the internationalization of sport may be helpful. Within the rules of chess or soccer we distinguish players of many talents, some of whom change how things are done. Global participation returns us to the issue of ‘mimicry’, but it is not especially ‘colonial’ mimicry. In joining a game, or a genre, we all begin with imitation: we would not want to say that Christie ‘mimicked’ Leroux who ‘mimicked’ Poe, even if we thought her ‘marginalized’ by her gender. On the one hand, the assumption that the post-colonial writer *imitates* with authority and authenticity asks us to question the assumptions of realism which crime fiction stylizes. On the other, the idea of imitation *with a difference* suggests another way forward which imports ideas about competence and contribution. In the relation between, say, a police force and the ambient culture, local differences and distinctions offer readers the pleasures of *recognition with a difference*. Historical asymmetries of access, publication, distribution, appreciation, sales, respect have themselves moved on. Generic choices (of a PI character or a locked-room plot) are one issue; who chooses is a different matter, as is for whom, the initial audience of address. We risk begging too many questions if we assert that in writing about someone foreign we are ventriloquizing and that ‘mimicry’ applies if and only if we happen to write from an imperial, colonial or post-colonial position.

### Unreal city, another country

Crime writers imagine cities which may, contingently, figure nations. The stylistic realisms of the genre encourage an impression of *reportage* which affect to witness contemporary developments, always within generic stereotypes. The duo of the reporter and the policeman, for example, offers a generic character-combination whose power was perhaps not even realized at the outset when Gaston Leroux invented the reporter Rouletabille (and a transplanted American Indian) for the locked-room classic, *Le Mystère de la Chambre Jaune*, which inspired Agatha Christie, who liked combining disarming innocence with shrewd intelligence. Generic assumptions take for granted the historical and institutional existence of newspapers as well as agencies of presumed law and order. The presence of scribes or explainers like Watson (legal niceties, for example, or marriage customs) was typical and remains common; expansion of subject has implied new, but not altogether different, narrative solutions. Watson is a stereotype, an English ‘chap’ of his day, good, brave, appreciative, not excessively clever. We think of him as a cliché of something pre-existing, not as creating an idea of Englishness. The question for post-colonial detection is whether or how the importation of such literature might offer templates for such creation: the

honest cop looks quite different in an Algeria wracked by religious strife or within ethnic rivalry in Bamako (Ngoye).

The substance of crime fiction is the secret, which offers its readers a kind of intellectual hide and seek; but its accidents often count for far more when we are deciding what to read. While the structures of law and law-enforcement differ historically and geographically, crime novelists, especially writing for their own countrymen, have to get them right. And the essence of the solver may be what we deduce about him (or her) between the lines, or in the interstices between the books (the multi-volume series not the periodical serial). The amateur detective appeals to law or custom as much as does the working professional of the police procedural; there is as much need for discretion and concealment from the contextual community in an imaginary country house as in the countryside or city; revelation always depends upon archaeology or analysis which situates individuals in their histories, and their histories within the particularities of place. There may be locked rooms, but there are no closed circuits. Society intrudes and obtrudes, and it is in part by virtue of the strength of depiction of a society that authors have been able to work with and from stereotype in character as well as plot. The social space they write about need not be true, but it must be plausible and recognizable for the course of their readers' engagement with the book. The question of what or how much to explain has dogged writers from the start, but is much more acute the less familiar the setting. Films have changed this, of course.

I think I have already indicated my reluctance to organize my discussion by nationality or residence, and my preference for an inheritance, but not a genealogical model. There are now Canadian, Australian, Malian PIs, hard- or soft-boiled (Howard Engel, Peter Corris, Achille Ngoye); on the model of Ed McBain's precinct structure, there are Algerian, New Zealand, South African police procedurals (Yasmina Khadra, Laurie Mantell, Wessel Ebersohn and James McClure). Crime fiction can engage with politics, discuss social problems, call for tolerance, but it must entertain. Nobody has to read it. Most of it is ephemeral, the authors who last must have something special, but the something may come to look different as time passes.

In Ngaio Marsh's wartime novels set in New Zealand, education, status, and class are just as apparent as in the novels set in England, and her satire of social types is directed as much against her Poms as her Kiwis. The stereotype of the educated native, the '*évolué*', may seem particularly apparent in *Vintage Murder* (1940), but one must remember that although Dr Rangi Te Pokiha, the Oxford-educated doctor, loses his temper when taunted as a nigger/native by one of the objectionable characters, he also reverses the perspective when he comments on the likely reaction of his (aristocratic) ancestors upon seeing their first crucifixion. In *Colour Scheme* (1943) Marsh evokes and discusses the savage strangeness of the New Zealand landscape, the Maori loss of cultural integrity



since colonization, the Europeans' sense of being intruders in a landscape hostile to them; in *Died in the Wool* (1945), she describes the routine of farm life, with all its hardships, and the special exigencies of the wool trade. Her characters are prejudiced, racially and nationally, by class and gender. The aggregate offers a picture of New Zealand, rural and provincial, in the early 1940s, which is not inaccurate, including not being inaccurate about the ways people romanticized and idealized their landscape into a version of pastoral, in the inherited literary sense rather than in terms of real sheep. With time its conservatism looks increasingly like satire, with its implicit reference to shared moral value.

Current fashion is far more vernacular, more street-wise, than the ages of aristocracy and gentry from which Poe or Leroux started. One of the achievements of the hard-boiled school is precisely the creation of mean streets, an 'unreal city' reality. Howard Engel's Canadian PI, Benny Cooperman drives through places you will find on a map to and from his home in Grantham, which you will not. Toronto, in the hands of Eric Wright, places Charlie Salter within the superficial egalitarianism of Canadian social styles, inflected by the class differences between Salter and his wife's family, themselves rooted in a pastoral 'hinterland' of Prince Edward Island. Cliff Hardy's Sydney helped make Peter Corris's reputation in what are otherwise very run-of-the-mill novels. The question remains whether these imaginary places invite shared loyalty to a nation. I think they can, especially through the popular media of television and film, but I suspect that they are supplementary. The current worldwide success of the Swedish writer, Henning Mankell, offers the same set of criteria and his Kurt Wallander is explicit about his fears for Sweden. But what of less urbanized nations, in which the metropolises do not perhaps have the overwhelming sway they have had in Western Europe or America? Love of the land is not political loyalty. Where hinterlands are close to cities, we find an often fierce attachment of the detective to the landscape. A detective such as James McClure's Kramer is the son of migrants to the city, and a romantic and pastoral nostalgia is part of his character and, one presumes, of other South Africans' ideas of themselves. But Kramer, of course, comes with Zondi, his Bantu sergeant, who reminds us that especially where there are slums, there is a third term which interrupts pastoral reveries.

If it seems a paradox that the inventions of crime and the seedy revelations of corruption can be positive contributions to national literary stocks and matters for shared celebration, one might consider the point I made earlier about satire. Not all societies tolerate public criticism. I have tried to suggest that a region marked by the experience of colonization and a region marked by other historical experiences may have more similarities than differences. Detection happens somewhere, and the creation of that 'where' is often assumed to figure a nation as its crimes focus contemporary anxieties. The new difficulty becomes whether and how far we recognize a kind of social allegory, as when Margaret Doody

ascribes worries about immigration, citizenship, and cultural difference to Aristotle's Athens – surely more to do with 21st century North America than with the fourth century BC. The local habitations offer new works with, as it were, local addresses, and new works with international ambitions. They have the same name.

### Conclusion

Post-colonial criticism has helped us all see place and nation differently, more self-consciously; it has defended authors from formerly colonized countries who employ the language and genres of their former rulers by categorizing their work as 'appropriation'. It has reversed our usual habits of looking at the world, but if reversal is everything, it merely reinforces what we had before, and becomes reactionary. Global participation in a strong popular genre offers interesting insights into both the idea of post-coloniality and crime fiction. It makes no sense, if we are to treat each other as equals, to blame authors who come from once-colonized countries as mimics or monkeys if they write detective fiction for money or to demand that they write something quite different, when we make no such demands of each other. Or to forbid each other to invent people or places far removed from us. Nor should we expect any such writer to invent a nation, especially if what we demand is uplift. These early positions in writing about the then 'new literatures' begged too many questions. In critical assertions about 'writing back to the centre', authors in popular genres were not usually included, even noticed. In the case of post-colonial detective fiction, the genre(s) can be used for revelation, excoriation, education, or tourist publicity. Crime fiction can also be harnessed to the need to tempt children to read, as in post-Independence Nigeria or contemporary France. Like its own secretive characters, crime fiction will say more than it knows. Through the apparent realism of its events and motivations, it depicts what we must hope is not everyday life, within its own local specificities. If it tests the limits of the theories we bring to it, it will have offered its own reorientations.

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