The Routledge Companion to Crime Fiction

Janice Allan, Jesper Gulddal, Stewart King, Andrew Pepper

Race and ethnicity

Publication details

Sam Naidu
Published online on: 29 Apr 2020

How to cite : - Sam Naidu. 29 Apr 2020, Race and ethnicity from: The Routledge Companion to Crime Fiction Routledge
Accessed on: 18 Sep 2023

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR DOCUMENT
This chapter examines contemporary crime fiction’s creation of innovative textual strategies such as shifts from individual crime to entangled webs of sociopolitical crimes, and from a local or national focus to a transnational one, in the quest for social justice. Crime fiction reflects, at times, the racism of its specific milieu, as well as evolving, reformist views and debates about race and ethnicity. Presenting often a morass of social relations with varying levels of resolution, contemporary crime fiction can be, depending on the author and reader, comfortably conservative, disquietingly retrograde, radically progressive, or acutely critical.

Historically, and depending on location, crime fiction has taken up various positions in relation to race and ethnicity, either maintaining the status quo or providing a popular platform for ideological and ethical questioning of race and ethnicity. First, however, the terms “race” and “ethnicity” are highly contentious and their usage in this chapter requires definition. Based in social constructivism, Cornell and Hartmann describe race as

a human group defined by itself or others as distinct by virtue of perceived common physical characteristics that are held to be inherent […]. Determining which characteristics constitute the race […] is a choice human beings make. Neither markers nor categories are predetermined by any biological factors.

(1998: 24)

Cornell and Hartmann’s inclusion of “choice” in their definition suggests human will, which may be internal or external to the group in question. On the other hand, they define ethnicity as a sense of common ancestry based on cultural attachments, past linguistic heritage, religious affiliations, claimed kinship, or some physical traits (19). Race and ethnicity, then, are terms which describe socially constructed groups based on distinctive physical and cultural characteristics, but additionally, “a relational dimension that indexes a group’s location within a social hierarchy” needs to be acknowledged (Ford and Harawa 2010: 251). With these social constructivist, contiguous definitions in mind, this chapter examines how crime fiction has concerned itself with race and ethnicity, bringing to the fore intertwined, often troubled, relations between groups as well as transgressions or misdeeds specific to certain groups and contexts.
Dominant images

British and American crime fiction of the nineteenth century concerned itself generally with upholding hegemonic notions of law and justice through rational, epistemological quests, rooted as they were in cultures which were increasingly concerned with crime, punishment, discipline and the threat posed by the racial “other”. These concerns were mediated in the literature through a prescriptive and pervasive discourse of race based on a white-black binary. White metropolitan authors such as Arthur Conan Doyle served to legitimate imperialist and colonialist ideologies by constructing Anglo-Saxon whiteness as dominant or superior to all “others”, especially foreign races and ethnicities. Not always rendered as inferior but rather evoking an exotic intrigue, Anderson et al. note that “foreign characters and foreign settings have [had] a privileged space in crime fiction since its origins” (2012: 1), due to their association with mystery, adventure and the “other”, specifically the colonial “other”. Scholars such as Caroline Reitz (2004) and Tobias Döring (2006) have interrogated “the inextricable link between crime fiction and the imperial enterprise” (Döring 2006: 4), demonstrating that imperial authority, order and discipline were affirmed through the fictional investigation of crime and the reconstruction of social stability. Döring, for example, denounces the often xenophobic, racist and stereotypical portrayals of foreigners, in particular of migrants from the colonies, found in the Holmes stories (74).

Attesting, however, to the complexity of attitudes regarding race found in early crime fiction, authors such as Doyle also attempted to interrogate and understand racial and ethnic differences. In “The Adventure of the Yellow Face” (1893), for example, at the heart of the mystery is an interracial marriage and a child of mixed race. Thwarted by this strange difference, Holmes fails to detect, and the hero of this story is therefore the tolerant and compassionate Grant Munro who does not repudiate his wife for having been previously married to an African American and who lovingly accepts the child as his own.

Context-driven, textual encoding of race and ethnicity through dominant imagery persisted in the British cosy whodunits of the early twentieth century. Novels by Agatha Christie, Dorothy L. Sayers or Margery Allingham rarely feature black or foreign characters (with the notable exception of Hercule Poirot himself, of course) and the dominance of whiteness was reinforced through their homogenous, monocultural casts and their determined preservation of the status quo. Ethnic “others”, such as the Belgian Poirot, or Americans, Jews and Middle Eastern characters do feature as exceptions to the norm, often with undesirable or suspicious traits. Studying ethnicity in Christie’s oeuvre, Jane Arnold notes that a great deal can be gleaned about “the place of Jews in English society”, concluding that “they are not an easy part of the society she describes, neither are they entirely alien” (1987: 275–76). While Arnold observes the reinscription of certain stereotypes, she concedes that “No particular Jewish characteristic is completely negative” (276), such that, while dominant images and ideologies are discernible, these texts also reflect that crime fiction’s engagement with racial and ethnic categories and relations was by no means always essentialist or binary.

The dominance of whiteness was also inscribed in the US hardboiled novel. According to Maureen Reddy, the criteria of whiteness, heterosexuality and masculinity encoded in texts by authors such as Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler confer on the detective his heroic status (2003: 10), consolidating that dominance. At this point also, crime fiction’s involvement in the delineation of racial and ethnic categories, or as Andrew Pepper puts it, its implication in the “hegemonic ambitions of those who have benefitted from the unequal distribution of power” (2000: 7), and its concurrent resistance to those categorisations and questioning of the ideology underpinning them, became more bold and far-reaching.
Race and ethnicity

Examples of that resistance and questioning of dominant racial and ethnic ideologies are found in the works of African American author, Chester Himes. Himes’s Harlem series describes a wide range of poor, black characters who are transplanted from the rural South to urban Harlem. Himes’s vivid and mordant descriptions of Harlem draw attention to the desperate, impoverished and often abject lives of black people in the US at the time. In the final, incomplete novel in the series, Plan B (1993), Himes creates a detective figure, Thomsson Black. Black, signalling a new form of overt engagement with race and ethnicity, is an ingenious character who articulates a strong political manifesto about the need for black people to reclaim their dignity by starting “at the bottom, at the chitterling of the hog” (Himes 1993: 166). Initially defined by his race and poverty, Black overturns this interpolation to lead an insurrection against racism.

In creating Black, Himes exhibits a keen awareness of the need to counter racial stereotypes found in mainstream crime fiction. Operating within the main parameters of the genre, Himes nevertheless troubles and inverts some of the genre’s conventions, such as casting a white male as the lead detective, and female or other races and ethnicities as peripheral, often villainous characters. Challenging persistently racist images in crime fiction and in US culture is, according to Norlisha Crawford (2017), Himes’s primary project. Crawford’s account of Himes’s subversion of mainstream crime fiction highlights his disruptive use of characterisation, his repudiation of hegemonic racial categories and his intersectional treatment of history, setting, class and culture. This subversion is a legacy that Himes passed down to contemporary black authors such as Walter Mosley, who created Easy Rawlins deliberately and consciously to address the scarcity of “black male heroes” in American literature. Commenting in an interview on the emphatic representation of race in his work, he claims that “hardly anybody in America has written about black male heroes […] There are black male protagonists and black male supporting characters, but nobody else writes about black male heroes” (Neuman 2011: n.p.). This paucity of black male heroes persists in mainstream crime fiction, but in recent African noir novels such as Mûkoma wa Ngûgî’s Black Star Nairobi (2013) and Leye Adenle’s When Trouble Sleeps (2018), black male heroes, and moreover, black female heroines are being inscribed, consequently modifying notions of heroism in diverse social contexts and configurations.

Transnational and postcolonial renderings

At the end of the twentieth century, scholars and critics took note of the emergence of a range of authors, detective figures and voices in crime fiction. While some took this growing diversity to signify a dismantling of racism and a newfound harmony, others warned against facile celebrations of multiculturality (Pepper 2000) or disingenuous disregard for structural and systemic racism (Reddy 2003). A distinct recent advance in crime fiction scholarship has been the development of a transnational approach which compares and contrasts crime fiction from across the globe (Krajenbrink and Quinn 2009).

Concomitantly, having moved beyond metropolitan settings and concerns, literary endeavour and academic attention shifted significantly to constitute various new subgenres of crime fiction, one of which is postcolonial crime fiction. Matzke and Mühleisen’s Postcolonial Postmortems: Crime Fiction from a Transcultural Perspective (2006), for instance, convincingly shows how postcolonial crime fiction, has extended and reshaped the genre to address notions of community, beliefs, race, gender and sociopolitical and historical formations in order to contest them. The new postcolonial are characterised by hybridity, especially the postcolonial detectives who blend “western police methods and indigenous cultural knowledge” (Christian 2001: 13), thus rendering them more effective in their respective settings.
Postcolonial crime fiction such as Tony Hillerman’s series set in Native American reservations of the American Southwest draws on and subverts the heritage of classic crime fiction in order to expose how “western” discourses of rationality, with their particular racial bias, while limited in any context, are particularly inadequate when it comes to solving crimes in the postcolonial context, where racial and ethnic difference, and its attendant power dynamics, carry such historical weight. Indeed, the very definition of “crime” is questioned and reimagined to include the violations and abuses of colonialism, slavery, genocide, and in the South African context, also apartheid. For Hillerman, recuperating Navajo history and culture is a prevailing concern, but also emphasised through the characterisation of his two detectives, Leaphorn and Chee, is the notion of hybridity. Leaphorn, the earlier Hillerman creation, studied anthropology at the University of Arizona and rejects certain aspects of Navajo culture in favour of logical reasoning. Leaphorn syncretises his academic learning, his intimate knowledge of Navajo social customs, and his respectful responsiveness to the environment and topography of the reservation in order to detect. Similar to Leaphorn, Chee works for the Navajo Nation Police and studied anthropology at university, but in contrast, Chee, a trained shaman, is a romantic dreamer who prefers to use emotion and intuition to detect. Hillerman’s engagement with race and ethnicity deliberately blurs boundaries between discrete categories and definitions. Leaphorn and Chee are thus entangled in Native American and white American social systems. Both detectives have to blend different knowledges to detect individual crimes on the reservation, and their liminal positioning points to wider, systemic crimes.

As seen in Hillerman’s texts, one of the main ontological interrogations prevalent in postcolonial crime fiction has to do with race and ethnicity: How are social racial taxonomies constructed historically in the post-colony? How do these racial hierarchies impact on the current society and politics? How are the crimes of today linked to the violent and oppressive racist regimes which gave rise to such systems of oppression? How can a society so riven by racial difference ever be reconciled? In South Africa, where a particularly pernicious and tenacious racist regime took root and flourished after the colonial era, these questions are very prominent in its crime fiction.

Entanglement and muddledness – South African post-apartheid crime fiction

Crime fiction in South Africa today is just as concerned with social disorder and political instability as it is with individual, sensational crimes around which thriller plots are constructed, as authors such as Deon Meyer, Margie Orford, Angela Makholwa and Andrew Brown present narratives with entangled histories and subjectivities, highlighting difference and sameness amongst crimes, and divisions and contiguities amongst racial and ethnic groups. Postcolonial, post-apartheid South Africa, far from being the “rainbow” nation that was envisaged in the early 1990s, is an economically unstable and politically fractured flailing democracy with racially marked power differentials, human rights abuses and iniquitous social stratifications. Given this status quo, crime fiction in South Africa functions as “a form of social hermeneutics […] within an ethically muddled topography” (de Kock 2015: 48). But this hermeneutics, I argue, is uniquely limited. This muddledness, especially when it comes to racial categories and race relations, rather than being “solved” in the literature, is its distinguishing feature, as authors, characters and readers grapple with it and remain, to a large extent, baffled and bewildered. The result is that the form of South African crime fiction is distinctive in that detection is limited to the level of abduction and, while racism is very much a concern, race and ethnicity as concepts have become destabilised and are often rendered as distorted or vague.
Significantly, South African fictional detectives explore, in an ontological sense, the entanglements between individuals and groups within an “ethically muddled topography”. Characters burdened by the racist typologies of apartheid share the condition of “entanglement”:

Entanglement is a condition of being twisted together or entwined, involved with; it speaks of an intimacy gained, even if it was resisted, or ignored or uninvited. It is a term which may gesture towards a relationship or set of social relationships that is complicated, ensnaring, in a tangle, but which also implies a human foldedness. It works with difference and sameness but also with their limits, their predicaments, their moments of complication.

(Nuttall 2009: 1)

Rather than rehearse the simplistic binaries of colonial or apartheid discourse (which could potentially reinforce them and thus be politically retrograde), South African crime fiction attempts to depict the condition of entanglement or hybridity, just as Hillerman was at pains to portray his Native American detectives as liminal subjects, operating in racial or ethnic spaces that are in-between and derived of many influences and affiliations. South African crime fiction concerns itself with the imbrication of individuals and groups, the peculiar intimacy wrought from past trauma and the current crises to which such propinquity gives rise.

Despite generally featuring a white male as the detective figure and adhering to the traditional hardboiled tradition in many respects, Deon Meyer’s novels exhibit this ineluctable folded-togetherness of the different racial and ethnic groups in South Africa. Over the years Meyer’s texts have expressed differing and even contradictory views about race and ethnicity. Taken together, his novels could be described as muddled about the topic of race and yet every plotline in the chronological present of a Meyer novel has an explication in South Africa’s colonial or apartheid past. In effect, Meyer offers, for every crime committed in contemporary South Africa, a backstory of intricate entanglement, including the story of how racial and ethnic typologies were created.

Building on this notion that race and race relations are entangled in both social and chronological dimensions, Meyer also depicts South Africa’s complex colonial and apartheid history by describing the growing prevalence of transnational criminal networks which criss-cross the globe. In a parallel move, he has downgraded his detectives’ narrative of white injury which coloured his earlier novels and curtailed the contrived presentation of black characters through awkward racial and ethnic epithets. In their place, Meyer has endeavoured to compose a portrait of entanglement that, muddled as it may appear, is effective in capturing the disorderly tangle of race and ethnic categories and relations in post-apartheid South Africa. When applied to Meyer, the term accentuates the muddledness with which he repeatedly attempts to express the disillusionment and disorder of contemporary South Africa. Cobra (2014) therefore conscientiously and entertainingly captures South Africa’s evolving and entangled systems of authority and power, cultural transformations and growing global networks, all of which are shown to have their roots in South Africa’s racist past.

Re-visiting race and ethnicity: Entanglement and transnationalism
in Cobra (2014)

By no means a coherent or consistent comment on race and ethnicity in post-apartheid South Africa, Cobra offers a problematisation of race and ethnicity through a deliberate emphasis on entanglement, and, relatedly, the extrapolation from various national, historical criminal
elements to transnational or global ones. Writing in Afrikaans, Meyer’s earlier novels aggregate to a recuperation project aimed at rehabilitating white men of Afrikaner ethnicity, through the figure of the detective-hero, all of whom have integrity, serve the nation-in-transition, and are ostensibly not racist despite having trained within the apartheid system. In Cobra, Benny Griessel, who has become a serialised protagonist, is haunted by the horrors of current crimes more so than the racist brutalities of the past regime. He is an intrepid, courageous detective who blurs racial lines through his class background. Impoverished and with little education, he exhibits an unswerving adherence to his own concept of a transcendent justice, having rejected apartheid’s skewed justice and post-apartheid’s muddled justice.

In so doing, he is shown to throw off the taint of his racial category and ethnicity, albeit while exposing himself as an idealistic fool. In previous novels, however, Griessel embodied a white injury narrative through references to his being passed over for promotion or to his frustration with his incompetent, black superiors. In Cobra, however, there is undoubtedly a shift and he is consolidated as a hero of the victims of crime, regardless of race or ethnicity. At worst, Griessel’s white injury narrative and heroism appeal to a white readership, and Meyer is thus able to achieve white bonding and assuage white guilt. At best, however, Griessel is a racialised white detective, an interdependent member of a multi-racial detective team, who is anti-racist, especially in his conceptualisation of justice, and, further, his investigations force him to interrogate systems and structures which engender material, racial inequalities. Consequently, Meyer’s Griessel is a convincing postcolonial detective who is “in process […] learning, adjusting, changing, compromising, rejecting, resisting” (Christian 2001: 13), a muddled detective operating in a muddled setting.

Griessel’s stature as a rehabilitated Afrikaner white man post-1994 is reinforced by the black subsidiary characters, in particular his colleagues Vaughn Cupido and Mbali Kaleni, who like and respect him. Originally, in previous novels they appeared as token black characters. Here, although substantially evolved, they still function to provide “authenticating commentary by a person of color” (Reddy 2003: 119), commentary which is required to exonerate the white detective and provide “an experience of absolution and affirmation for white readers who do not believe themselves to be racist” (120–21).

Cobra is a hardboiled, police procedural thriller pivoting on the intersection of political intrigue with transnational financial networks. These networks are in league with terrorist organisations and governments, with British Intelligence Services, South Africa’s State Security Agency and with a petty pickpocket called Tyrone Kleinbooi, who is black or, to be more specific he is “Coloured” — this is the racial designation used by the apartheid government and which is still in common usage to describe a diverse group that is descended from Dutch colonisers, indigenous San and Khoi-San people, and various other racial, cultural and ethnic antecedents, including slaves from Asia. Through an emphasis on Tyrone’s race and ethnicity as “Coloured” (in one sense indeterminate and hybrid, but from another perspective very specific and fixed in terms of social and cultural positioning), South Africa’s apartheid past and post-apartheid present are brought under the spotlight.

A complex web of global and local criminal threads are thus woven together and at the centre is the local petty criminal, Tyrone. With this intricate plotting, Meyer examines how entangled individual characters’ lives and criminal systems are, and how race determines one’s position in the web. Ultimately, the paltry criminal who is initially portrayed as a victim of his sociopolitical circumstances emerges as one of the heroes of the novel. Like Himes’s Black, Tyrone has very few resources with which to fight “against overwhelming odds” (Himes 1993: 166), and yet he succeeds, subverting long-established categories of race and power.

Griessel’s black sidekicks, Cupido, a “Coloured” captain in the Hawks team, and Kaleni, who is Zulu, the only female member of the team, provide further exploration of entangled
Race and ethnicity

Race relations. Cupido, who is straight-talking and sharply dressed, explicitly and provocatively comments on racial and class inequalities. Rather than Griessel, Meyer deploys this character with his demotic speech (the original Afrikaans and his Cape slang are retained in the English translation) to make acute comments about South Africa’s colonial past, racism, class and transnational crime. Remarking on the kidnapping of the wealthy white British mathematician from the luxurious wine-farm, he asks of the sympathetic Griessel:

And what is this here? German owner of a Boer farm with a French name where a Brit is kidnapped. Fucking United Nations of Crime, that’s where we’re heading. And why? ’Cause they bring their troubles here. Like those French at Sutherland, and the Dewani thing, and who gets the rap? South-jokken-Africa.

(19)

Here Cupido voices not only a type of xenophobia resulting from South Africa being maligned in international media, but also a postcolonial critique about how South Africa has historically been exploited by, mainly European, foreigners. Noteworthy is how Cupido’s character has been developed over a number of novels into a less-caricatured, more nuanced portrait with racial and ethnic features conveyed through speech, dress and anti-racist sentiments. This character is, however, complicated by being at times xenophobic or racist himself, thus touching on a complex chain or entangled pattern whereby the victim of racism, deeply steeped in a cognitive framework, becomes a perpetrator. Cupido ends the above-quoted rant with a telling racially-loaded line: “But they screen the little volkies in slave uniforms and let them clean up after their whitey backsides until ten o’clock at night” (19). Here Cupido is referring to the exploitation of “Coloured” workers (“volkies”) on luxurious wine estates and guest farms in and around Cape Town, alluding also to the region’s colonial and slave era and the fact that racial power dynamics have remained disturbingly similar for three-and-a-half centuries.

In contrast to Cupido’s quips and irreverence, Captain Kaleni is Griessel’s formal, dignified, black, female boss. She is shown to have a strong emotional response to her work and to be ethically the strongest member of the team. When placed under pressure by corrupt police administrators to drop the case, Kaleni responds by making a surprising comparison between the democratic black-majority government and the apartheid white-minority government (172–73). With this act of defiance Kaleni simultaneously shames her superiors, presents a potted history of the anti-apartheid struggle, points to South Africa’s entangled histories and political systems, and, counterintuitively it would seem, deracines South Africa’s most corrosive crime – corruption. Meyer is adroit in devising that Kaleni, a black woman, indicts the apartheid and post-apartheid regimes for the same crime. Just like Griessel, Kaleni is purposely shown to be committed to a cause, in this case, democracy, rather than to a racial group. Thus, the two detectives are aligned, one serving justice and the other democracy, with both espousing a discourse of non-racialism. Together, the trio of Griessel, Cupido and Kaleni, entangled as they are through shared histories, forced intimacies and a common (over-burdened) profession, form a multi-racial, multiethnic detective team. Such teams are found also in the novels of Margie Orford or Andrew Brown, where great care is given to these portraits of polygonal entanglements. This development in form, the move away from a lone detective to a group or team of interdependent, united members, is common in South African crime novels in which synthesis of difference or hybridity is required to detect, and, thematically, the intention is to signal a burgeoning multiculturalism.

In Cobra Meyer attempts to redefine the hardboiled tradition by presenting a motley trio of detectives and an underdog, black hero pitted against the most potent transnational criminal forces. In so doing, he creates a somewhat muddled, in terms of political commitment,
characterisation and thematic thrust, but highly entertaining South African postcolonial, post-apartheid crime thriller with formulaic and conservative images of race and ethnicity, as well as progressive, transformative ones.

Conclusion

Many critics may view Meyer’s crack at representing race and race relations in contemporary South Africa as disingenuous or naïve. While this choice of protagonist does not on the surface transform orthodox depictions of racial difference, a closer examination of Griessel reveals a white character grappling with guilt, trauma, frustration and the desire to effect a sort of universal, non-racial justice. Not entirely devoid of the Eurocentric and Americentric elements of the genre which undergirded its structural relationship with whiteness, Cobra nevertheless presents a white detective who is undergoing a slow and painful metamorphosis, a work in progress. This muddledness is not exclusive to white detectives. Andrew Brown’s Eberard Februarie in Coldsleep Lullaby (2005) and Diale Tlholwe’s Thabang Maje in Ancient Rites (2008) are black detectives experiencing a similar muddledness as they navigate a bewildering terrain of complicated entanglements, cultural hybridity and increasingly blurry racial and ethnic categories.

One of the paradoxes of this crime fiction is that, while systemic and structural racism are rendered hyper-visible in contemporary crime fiction, such texts are intent on dismantling those categories on which such systems and structures were built. Most saliently, in terms of engagement with race and ethnicity, contemporary crime fiction facilitates a view of intricate current relations between nations as being linked to a past, colonial era. This feature of contemporary crime fiction extends the interrogation of race and ethnicity beyond the confines of national settings, to explore how global networks of oppressive and exploitative systems and structures “once thought of as separate” now intersect in “unexpected ways” (Nuttall 2009: 11). Reflecting the contradictory trends of increasing “tribalism” and transnationalism of the world today, contemporary crime fiction creates multiple, entangled locations and time frames in which to view issues of race and ethnicity.

Notes

1 This strange difference for Holmes is an unknowable (in terms of ratiocination) social configuration of a family comprised of a white mother who had been married to a black man, a white father and a mixed-race child who is the product of the previous marriage.
2 See Maureen Reddy’s thesis that this hypermasculine, heterosexual, white, male central consciousness of the hardboiled tradition is defined against the “others” of the narrative (2003: 9).
3 For a more detailed account of Cobra see Naidu (2016).

Bibliography

Race and ethnicity


