

*The Case of the POCRIF Research Group*

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**1. The body**

This issue of *Coolabah* compiles a sample of results of research carried out by the members of the group POCRIF: “Postcolonial Crime Fiction: a global window into social realities”. The group was founded in 2013 under the aegis of the Centre of Australian Studies at the University of Barcelona. Although CEA focuses much of its activity on the lively exchange of ideas, scholars and students between Catalonia and its antipodes, it does not constrict its activities to the Pacific area. Rather, it has a global postcolonial vocation, and is thus the perfect matrix for a research group with such eclectic and diverse interests as POCRIF. All its members belong to CEA, and their research is part of the wider academic and investigative work carried out therein. *Coolabah* is one of the journals published by the Centre itself, and the works presented in this issue, except for one invited contribution, are the result of a *Ministerio de Economía y Competitividad* financed research project on Postcolonial Crime Fiction (FFI2013-45101-P).

**2. A few clues and antecedents**

The Postcolonial Crime Fiction Group’s main ambition, as one reads on their webpage (<https://crimefiction.net/>), is to open “a global window into social realities”. Working mostly on fiction, though also interested in other media such as cinema and the visual arts, in their critical approach to Postcolonial Crime Fiction they emphasize “the most important social issues of our day: poverty, marginalisation, injustice and the use and misuse and significance of place and space”.<sup>1</sup> They consider that what has come to be called the “postcolonial crime novel” offers particularly significant insights into these problematic issues.

POCRIF’s objects of study, therefore, are to be met at the crossroads between postcoloniality and crime. This is indeed a savoury knot. This introduction is not the place to look into the debated meaning of ‘postcolonial’, but I cannot resist synthesizing

its complexity through recall of Said's words in his introduction to *Orientalism*. As he puts it there, his aim in writing this seminal book is, in short, "unlearning the inherent dominative mode" (Said 1979: 66) that characterizes human relations. One must note how nicely this coincides with the central concerns explored by POCRIF, namely "issues such as injustice, poverty, corruption, racism, misogyny, homophobia or exploitation".<sup>ii</sup>

Regarding the second member of the equation, crime fiction, definitions also vary, and this is neither the place to draw thin lines between namings and sub-genres such as mystery, spy, 'hard-boiled', detective fiction, and other labels which circulate in the literature about this type – or rather, these types – of stories. The forms of crime fiction are vast and varied, yet we need to note that, as Charles J. Rzepa and Lee Horsley recall in their introduction to *A Companion to Crime Fiction* (2010), not everything that shines – that *sins* – is crime fiction: "Transgressions alone do not crime fiction make [*sic.*]. Sin does not rate, generally, or violent or even illegal acts, per se, but the degree to which their illegality features in the plot" (2010: 1). In this sense, the place the transgression occupies in the narrative is crucial, as is crucial also the place where the crime happens – once we agree that such thing means *crime*. Each place, culture and historical moment qualifies crime and its punishment differently, and therefore there cannot be a universal definition of this concept, nor of crime fiction itself. It follows that, as claimed by George Demko, "as a literary form, the mystery is uniquely suited to provide a window into places, cultures, environments and more" (Demko, 2007).<sup>iii</sup> Opening this window is precisely POCRIF's mission statement, as we have read. It follows then that crime fiction is not only concerned with individual ethical choices, but with those of the whole society where the crime takes place. To quote Rzepa and Horsley again, "detective fiction has remained a resilient and versatile genre because ... it represents the investigation of individual crimes but can also work to expose the failures, traumas and brutalities of political and social life" (2010: 1). In his chapter from the same anthology devoted to Postcolonial Crime Fiction, Ed Christian agrees on this point, stating that "as a genre, detective fiction often moves from the interrogation of suspects to the interrogation of society" (Christian 2010: 284).

Postcolonialism being so concerned with social landscapes and inequalities, it is not surprising that it has come to be on such good terms with the literary genre of crime fiction. Nels Pearson and Mark Singer, who have edited one of the most important anthologies of critical studies on this productive tandem published so far, *Detective Fiction in a Postcolonial and Transnational World*, remark in their introduction what has not gone unnoticed to many, namely, "the increasing number of postcolonial and ... transnational authors who adapt detective and crime fiction and conventions" (qtd. in Dony 2009: 3).

There is general agreement that crime fiction as we know it (mostly through the detective figure, though again, not only) has its foundation in Edgar Allan Poe's "Murders in the Rue Morgue", first published in 1841. For its part, postcolonialism is but the obverse of colonialism. Being obvious that crime and colonialism go hand in hand together, it is perhaps not a coincidence that, like crime fiction, also colonial fiction should have also come of age in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The two items put together gave rise to the popular genre of colonial crime fiction, where, of course, the criminal was of necessity the native – and the figure of the Indian thug comes to mind

immediately. The connection between British imperialism and criminality has been explored by Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee in *Crime and Empire: The Colony in Nineteenth-Century Fictions of Crime* (2003), by Caroline Reitz in *Detecting the Nation: Fictions of Detection and the Imperial Venture, 1788- 1927* (2004), and by Yumna Siddiqi in *Anxieties of Empire and the Fiction of Intrigue* (2008).<sup>iv</sup> These studies add to earlier ones, frequently focusing on the giant figure of Sherlock Holmes and its inextricability from Empire, such as Jon Thompson's *Fiction, Crime, and Empire: Clues to Modernity and Postmodernism* (1993).<sup>v</sup> Colonialism gave rise to deep anxieties in the metropolitan populations, which were often exorcized through the relaxing means of reading crime fiction portraying both clear culprits and the appeal of charismatic detectives, policemen or keepers of law and order of different kinds.

### 3. But 'who done it' in Postcolonial Crime Fiction?

Postcolonial Crime Fiction turns the tables on colonialist ideologies. In colonial crime fiction the detective was part of the oppressive machine of Empire, whereas the villain was all too often the native. Yet in postcolonial times this distribution of roles does not hold any longer, not only because to a considerable extent colonialist ideologies have been replaced by postcolonial ones (meaning both anti-colonial and egalitarian ones), but also because, happily, the empire *is no more* – *sensu strictu* at least. Thus, “if the genre is defined by a dialogue between a crime and its resolution and punishment, then what needs to be explored is how the definition of crime, of the criminal and of the detective has evolved from the publication of the first crime fiction books in colonial times to the current multimediality of the genre in our postcolonial and globalized world” (Bertacco 2014: 7). Things have indeed become complicated at present times, thus it is not straightforward to answer questions such as: Who is now the detective in formerly colonial and colonized nations, be they settler societies (such as Australia), settled ones (like India or the Caribbean) or ambiguously both, like South Africa? And who is the new criminal in those same places? And, more importantly, what are the crimes that at present times need to be discovered, uncovered and investigated in those places, and others? What transgressions should be redressed, atoned or exonerated? The range of suspects thrown by Postcolonial Crime Fiction onto these categories is unending, in a globalized world characterized by cross-culturality and transnationalism, boundary blurring in all spheres of life, cultural and ideological hybridity and, ultimately, a tendency to emphasize transitional positions of all kinds.

Regarding the detective figure in Postcolonial Crime Fiction, it can belong to different groups and communities “police, private, or amateur detectives from formerly colonized peoples or nations” (Rzepka and Horsley 2010). But the picture, again, is complex:

Some readers might include among postcolonial detectives only indigenous people from once colonized countries that have achieved independence. Others might include detectives who are members of groups that were once oppressed or marginalized, wherever they may live, (Rzepka and Horsley 2010)

which means that, as we had effectively suspected, Postcolonial Crime Fiction can be set anywhere, not only in formerly colonized countries. Rzepka and Horsley also

consider that postcolonial theory need not be restricted to postcolonial fictions proper, but that it can be applied to any criminal fiction, since

even though they are not strictly postcolonial, applying to these detectives the critical insights of postcolonial theory can be illuminating, as they too can be seen to be struggling against neo-colonialism, assimilation, and the hegemony of Western culture. (Rzepka and Horsley 2010: 283)

Notwithstanding this wide range of possibilities, the POCRIF group has chosen to focus their critical attention on the postcolonial world in a geographic sense, and most of the works discussed here are set in Australia – plus three set in China, Gibraltar and the Caribbean, respectively. Since some analyze Aboriginal detectives, a couple of observations may be of relevance. On the one hand, Christophe Dony and others have noted that Postcolonial Crime Fiction and its guardians of law and order, be they detectives or not, often challenge received notions of good and evil as understood in Western societies. Those detectives tend to complicate purely reason-driven Western epistemologies in their ways of solving their cases. Notions such as those of justice, retribution or truth are approached in manners which evince the complexity of their authors' cultural alignments, often educated in-between Western and non-Western cultures, or living transnational lives and publishing books with a virtually global reach. In these cases,

are they to rely on Western investigative techniques or on their own cultural intuitions and experience? They occupy, in Homi K. Bhabha's terms, a liminal space within which their choices can constitute an extension of colonial control and oppression or an expression of resistance, accompanied by a reliance on indigenous knowledge. (Dony 2009: 2)

Another very important element in Postcolonial Crime Fiction, as we shall also see in the following pages, is that most often the cases – be they crimes or mere transgressions – are connected to the traces of colonialism and to neo-colonial corruption, usually provoked or magnified by rampant neoliberalism. And very frequently, as happens with some fictions analyzed here, authors as well as detectives have very clear ecological agendas in mind.

#### **4. Further suspects**

POCRIF has positioned itself at the leading end of research into a vibrant genre which is gaining adepts by the day in the form of writers, readers, and critics. Engaged and passionate scholarship such as that provided by the articles contained in this issue is on the increase. Besides the critical anthology edited by Pearson and Singer aforementioned, several other anthologies and monographies on Postcolonial Crime Fiction have seen the light of day in recent years, like Adrienne J. Gosselin's *Multicultural Detective Fiction: Murder From the Other Side* (1999), Ed Christian's *The Post-Colonial Detective* (2001), and Christine Matzke and Susanne Mühleisen's *Postcolonial Postmortems: Crime Fiction from a Transcultural Perspective* (2006), together with very related ones such as *Traces, Codes, and Clues: Reading Race in Crime Fiction* (2003), by Maureen T. Reddy.

Academic journals have joined the effort through issuing special volumes on the genre. For instance, the prestigious postcolonial biannual *Moving Worlds: A Journal of Transcultural Writings* published its “Crime Across Cultures” volume in 2013. *Textus: English Studies in Italy* also devoted one of its 2014 volumes to the topic of “Postcolonial Crimes: Crime Fiction and the Other”. And probably many other special issues on the area are in circulation, or will be soon – like this volume of *Coolabah*, for that matter. As to the very useful scholarly companions, it is remarkable that *The Cambridge Companion to Crime Fiction*, published in 2006, should not contain any specific chapter on this booming area of creation and enquiry. By contrast, the also mentioned *A Companion to Crime Fiction*, by Blackwell-Wiley, includes the chapter “Ethnic Postcolonial Crime and Detection (Anglophone)” authored by Ed Christian. Remarkably, the (to my knowledge) most recent critical anthology on postcolonial fiction, *The Cambridge Companion to the Postcolonial Novel* (2015), includes a chapter on ‘The Postcolonial Crime Novel’, authored by Stephen Knight.

## 5. Back to forensic evidence

The following pages open with **Bill Phillips’s** article “**The Representation of Aboriginality in the Novels of Peter Temple**”, where he cleverly dissects ideological aspects in the work of this Australia-based, South-Africa-born author, both against the received tropes of the genre and with regard to Temple’s political agenda. Providing a useful introduction to key aspects of crime fiction and explaining how contemporary authors interrogate and subvert them in different ways, Phillips argues that in his novels Temple strives to eschew what has been called ‘Aboriginalism’ – Australia’s local version of Said’s Orientalism – and that his success in this undertaking is, as the scholar puts it, “mixed” rather than complete.

As a very fitting complement to Phillips’s discussion of Temple’s work and his contextualization in the wider genre conventions, in “**Philip McLaren and the Indigenous-Australian Crime Novel**”, **Cornelis Martin Renes** provides a detailed introduction to the specificities of the genre in Australia. Renes positions the fiction of the best known Aboriginal Australian crime fiction writer within this tradition, and goes on to offer a detailed analysis of the political implications of each of McLaren’s novels, which are very connected to economic and ecological interests of different parties. In the article McLaren is shown to condemn the perpetuation of colonialist oppression, now taking the form of neo-colonialist, neo-liberal practices which unfortunately keep alienating Aboriginal communities from their inherent rights.

For her part, **Sue Ballyn** has chosen to present us with a well-documented and readable ‘detective case’ in her contribution. “**The Biography of Adelaide de la Thoreza: Fact or Fiction?**” begins with some stimulating reflections on the nature and complexities of the biographic genre, to then take us by the hand into the quite sensational biography of this Spanish woman convict, published in 1878 and purported to be true. As the text progresses, however, Ballyn discloses how her detective work as researcher has proven that this high-flown melodrama text is pure fabrication. Having reached that conclusion, there still remain some doubts... which I shall not ungraciously dispel here so that you enjoy the article – ‘the case’ – all the better.

The cycle of Australian detection closes with **Catalina Ribas Segura's "Phryne Fisher: A Postcolonial Female Detective in *Ruddy Gore* (1995)"**, which continues the historical excursus initiated in the previous article. Here we have a chance to recall the contemptible situation of non-White migrants and residents in the Australia of the early 20th century, severely constricted by the White Australia Policy and the damaging stereotypes it generated. Ribas Segura's detailed analysis of the character of Phryne Fisher incorporates the crucial figure of the woman sleuth into our collection, braiding together gender, ethnicity and class in a suggestive intersectional analysis of *Ruddy Gore*, both the novel and its audio-visual version – which show remarkable ideological contrast.

Beyond Australian borders but still on Pacific waters, **Isabel Santaulària i Capdevila's "This Is Getting a Little Too Chinese for Me': The Representation of China in Crime Fiction Written in English"** transports the reader to Chinese latitudes, to provide analysis of several crime novels written by non-Chinese authors who choose to set their narratives in a territory endemically prone to exoticization. Santaulària's straightforward indictment is that although criticism of the West is not absent from the works she analyses, all of them commit what she names as Sino-Orientalism – another cognate of Said's productive concept – as they present contemporary China as an alternately backward or felonious society, and often both, whose only way to progress is through imitation of the Western way.

The only contribution by a non-member of the POCRIF group takes us to the Mediterranean, with **John A Stotesbury's "The Crime Scene as Museum: The (Re)construction in the Bresciano Series of a Historical Gibraltarian Past"**. This article delves into the little known world of Gibraltarian fiction and its specific problems, introducing unfamiliar readers to a seven-volume series of novels written in tandem by two well-known local writers. Their collaborative fictions are set in the Gibraltar of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and feature Giovanni Bresciano, of mixed Genoese and English parentage, in the amateur detective role. The series was completed in 2015, and Stotesbury claims that it deserves further attention from scholars interested in the connections between (post)colonial crime, historical fiction, and what has been termed "museumification".

The issue closes with **"Marlon James's 'Dangerous' A Brief History of Seven Killings"**, a review contributed by **Maria Grau Perejoan**, again a member of POCRIF. Travelling to Caribbean shores, in her text she reports on Jamaican writer Marlon James's acclaimed novel, winner of the Man Booker Prize in 2015. Set in the convoluted atmosphere of Jamaica in the 1970s and describing an attempt of assassination of Bob Marley (in the novel referred to as "the singer") from a plurality of viewpoints, this is a sophisticated and multivocal text which overflows with crime and violence. In her discussion, Grau points to some reception and linguistic issues which in different ways affect not only this particular work, but the totality of Caribbean fiction.

I would not want to close this introduction without thanking the POCRIF group for entrusting me with the edition of their first joint publishing venture, to which I have dedicated as much care as I could within somewhat adverse circumstances. Thanks are also due to the peer reviewers for their careful reading and meticulous timing.

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<sup>i</sup> POCRIF webpage (<https://crimefiction.net/>).

<sup>ii</sup> POCRIF webpage.

<sup>iii</sup> George J. Demko created a vibrant webpage devoted to the exploration of the genre:  
<http://www.dartmouth.edu/~gjdemko/toc.htm>

<sup>iv</sup> Siddiqi analyzes colonial as well as postcolonial fictions.

<sup>v</sup> As well as numerous journal articles such as *Otis* 1998.

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