

Translating English: Youth, Race and Nation in Colin MacInnes's *City of Spades* and *Absolute Beginners*

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Introduction

The 1950s represent a key decade in the formation of an English national identity based on multicultural and multiethnic principles. This process was informed by the intersection of a number of factors operating during the period including the break up of empire, the Windrush generation of immigrants to Britain, and the emergence of distinct youth subcultures that negotiated black and American popular culture. Colin MacInnes was especially attuned to the relationship between these social and cultural factors and his fifties novels are conducive to an understanding of the period in terms of the emergence of this new model of English identity. MacInnes was interested in exploring the submerged worlds of 1950s London that engaged both black and youth subcultures. In his fiction, he achieved this by presenting idiosyncratic first-person narrators that purported to be from these worlds, and whose purpose it was to communicate their marginalized and hidden experiences to the reader. This involved a certain amount of textual ventriloquism and fluid transference between identities. The individuals he creates are, of course, constructed out of writing, and since the rise of post-structuralism readers have become wary of such textual representations of identity. Nevertheless, MacInnes's characters create the effect of exposing the reader to what appear to be authentic subaltern voices that are allowed to speak their own experiences and concerns (Spivak).¹

However, MacInnes remains largely overlooked in critical analyses of the postwar novel. Blake Morrison (1986), Harry Ritchie (1988),

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Deborah Philips and Ian Haywood (1998) all exclude MacInnes in their otherwise informative books on the literature of the 1950s, and he fails to get a mention in recent critical surveys of the postwar British novel (Gasiorek; Head; Brannigan). Two exceptions are Alan Sinfield and Steven Connor who both offer short but perceptive analyses of *Absolute Beginners* (Sinfield 169-71; Connor 89-94). One of the aims of this article, therefore, is to recover the importance of MacInnes as a writer who was particularly sensitive to shifts in British culture and society in the 1950s. In what follows, I discuss two novels of his *London Trilogy* (although there will be cross-reference to his journalism) in three sections. The first analyzes the deployment of narrative techniques in *City of Spades* and *Absolute Beginners*, the second explores the construction of Englishness in *Absolute Beginners*, and the third focuses on the representation of black immigrant identity in *City of Spades*.

Free Form: MacInnes's Narrative Strategies

The impulse behind MacInnes's fiction is a desire to represent marginalized voices, as a response to what he considered to be a misrepresentation of youth and black subcultures in the mainstream media. His narratives are driven by an imperative to record previously unrepresented voices, lest they "disappear irretrievably" (Benjamin 247).² In a 1959 review of Shelagh Delaney's *A Taste of Honey*, MacInnes writes:

As one skips through contemporary novels, or scans the acreage of fish-and-chip dailies and the very square footage of the very predictable weeklies, as one blinks unbelievably at 'British' films and stares boss-eyed at the frantic race against time that constitutes telly, it is amazing—it really is—how very little one can learn about life in England here and now. (MacInnes, *England* 206)

He goes on to stress how little 'we' have learned, through the cultural sites he refers to above, of:

working-class child mothers, ageing semi-professional whores, the authentic agonies of homosexual love, and the new race of English born coloured boys [...] the millions of teenagers [...] the Teds [...] the multitudinous Commonwealth minorities in our midst [...]. (206)

Responding, therefore, to this lack of representation, MacInnes, in his novels, aims to fill the gap he identifies in contemporary literature and journalism concerning these alternative lifestyles.

In terms of narrative technique, MacInnes achieves his aim by producing first person narratives from individuals placed within the subcultures. In *Absolute Beginners*, the narrative is provided by an unnamed white teenager who acts as a guide through the subcultural world the novel describes. This teenager communicates in an idiosyncratic language that situates him outside the mainstream English culture:

He didn't wig this, so giving me a kindly smile, he stepped away to make himself respectable again. I put a disc on to his hi-fi, my choice being Billie H., who sends me even more than Ella does, but only when, as now, I'm tired, and also, what with seeing Suze again, and working hard with my Rolleiflex and then this moronic conversation, graveyard gloomy. But Lady Day has suffered so much in her life she carries it all for you, and soon I was quite a cheerful cat again. (27-28)

Here, the incorporation of unofficial and unlicensed language, ("wig," "sends," "cat") and references to the insider's knowledge of a specific subcultural interpretive community ("Billie H.," "Ella," "Lady Day") acts as a performative statement of opposition to dominant culture. The style announces itself as distinct from Standard English and operates as a statement or proclamation of rejection and critique of dominant cultural values. Although this does not necessarily reproduce the authentic voice of actual teenagers in an ethnographic sense, it does reproduce the ideological function of style in youth subcultures. As Dick Hebdige argues: "The communication of a significant difference, then (and the parallel communication of a group identity), is the 'point' behind the style of all spectacular subcultures" (Hebdige 102). The construction of the teenager's voice in MacInnes's novel is a

textual representation of the function of subcultures to distance themselves from the adult mainstream, and operates as a process of identity-forming empowerment. This can be seen in the conversation the teenage has with his mother:

“You made us minors with your parliamentary whatsits,” I told her patiently. “You thought, ‘That’ll keep the little bastards in their places, no legal rights, and so on,’ and you made us minors. Righty-o. That also freed us from responsibility, didn’t it? [...] And then came the gay-time boom and all the spending money, and suddenly you oldos found that though we minors had no rights, we’d got the money power.” [...] This left me quite exhausted. Why do I *explain* it to them, talking like some Method number [...]. (43)

Here, the linguistic deviations from Standard English (“whatsits”, “Righty-o,” “oldos,” “Method number”) are part of the teenager establishing his cultural distance from the parent(s) culture. However, MacInnes is careful to maintain clarity within his writing; the style is clearly accessible to a mainstream readership despite the inclusion of the non-standard forms.

In presenting this alternative linguistic style, the text produces a dual narrative address, as it internally constructs a dual set of ‘implied’ readers.³ Firstly, a ‘reader’ who is part of the teenage subculture and will recognize the situations, characters and world of the text; this reader will feel included by the narrative address. Secondly, a ‘reader’ who is excluded; this reader is part of the dominant culture to which the text is simultaneously addressed as a revelatory discourse of the culture of a specific subcultural ‘other’ (Connor 8-13).⁴

This dual narrative address is also evident in *City of Spades*. In this text, this is more overtly identified by the split first-person homodiegetic⁵ narration of the two central characters, Montgomery Pew, a white middle-class civil servant working for the Colonial Department, and Johnny Fortune, a black Nigerian student studying in London. Pew’s language represents Standard English:

Primed by my brief study of the welfare dossiers, I awaited, in my office, the arrival of the first colonials. With some trepidation: because for one who,

like myself, has always felt great need of sober counsel, to offer it to others [...] seemed intimidating. (16)

Johnny Fortune's style is quite different from Pew's official language:

In the Circus overhead I looked around more closely at my new city. And I must say it was a bad disappointment: so small, poky, dirty, not magnificent! Red buses, like shown to us on the cinema, certainly, and greater scurrying of the population than at home. But people with glum clothes and shut-in faces. Of course, I have not seen yet the Parliament Houses, or many historic palaces [...]. (13)

Slight idiosyncrasies in linguistic style ("a bad disappointment," "like shown to us" and "Parliament Houses") mark off Fortune as an ethnic outsider to dominant British culture, and establish his position of difference. The outsider narrative also acts as a defamiliarization of English culture for a reader from that culture—a kind of reversed travel narrative. Again, though, MacInnes chooses to incorporate the linguistic deviations within a reasonably accessible style that would be familiar to a mainstream English readership.

The dual narrative structure of this novel allows MacInnes to represent the voice of a particular minority subculture (through Fortune's narrative), that of the black immigrant living in London in the 1950s, but also to depict dominant white middle-class culture (albeit a 'liberal' representative in Pew). It attempts to represent black subcultures through the construction of a non-Standard English voice that signifies ethnic difference through linguistic difference, and which serves to articulate the case of the marginalized group, whilst at the same time alerting dominant white society to the actualities of racism in Britain in the 1950s.

The subversion of Standard English in Fortune's narrative in *City of Spades* represents an ideological challenge to dominant culture. It is through language and the disruption of 'Standard' English that the emergent culture constructs its own separate identity. The subversion of language thus becomes emblematic of a wider agenda against a range of cultural positions *vis-à-vis* the dominant culture. As Mikhail

Bakhtin has identified, a nation's language and national identity are ideologically linked, and this connection is negotiated through the literature produced by a specific national culture. Bakhtin argues that the novel form is highly conducive to the processes of decentralization and disruption of the attempts by dominant cultural forces to standardize and unify the language of a nation. He suggests that whilst there are "centripetal" forces acting on a national language that attempt to unify the forms of public discourse and place it under the control of dominant ideological forces, there are always corresponding "centrifugal" forces which resist the process of centralization.⁶ For MacInnes, as for Bakhtin, this process is fundamentally ideological and is represented in the attempt of marginal groups to challenge the ideology of dominant power frameworks.

The representative function of the teenager's voice in *Absolute Beginners* and Johnny Fortune's narrative in *City of Spades*, therefore, exceeds the portrayal of individual characters. Their narratives are a representation of collective subcultural identities that attempt to articulate a discourse of empowerment for particular marginalized groups in 1950s society. This technique of producing a collective narrative corresponds to the ideological function identified by Deleuze and Guattari, in what they call "minor literature," as the political representation of marginalized discourses in a fictional form. This collective narrative is produced specifically through the deployment of alternative linguistic styles.

In the texts analyzed here, MacInnes deploys two 'foreign' appropriations of the 'national' language that function as centripetal forces undermining 'Standard' English. These two 'foreign' interruptions of English intersect with contemporary anxieties around national identity, namely in terms of Americanization and the immigration of black and Asian groups from Britain's former colonies.

When it was first published, several contemporary critics and reviewers compared *Absolute Beginners* to J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*, mainly because of the similarity in subject matter and the narrative address of the two texts (Gould xiii). This comparison with

Salinger indicates wider debates about the Americanization of English culture in the 1950s, and especially the role of youth subcultures in this process. Although MacInnes maintains that English youth culture retains its own specific national identity,⁷ the deployment of an appropriation of American forms, accents and modes of expression becomes a narrative strategy in *Absolute Beginners* in the formation of a distinct youth identity that challenges the traditional and dominant constructions of Englishness: "I swore by Elvis and all the saints that this last teenage year of mine was going to be a real rave. Yes, man, come whatever, this last year of the teenage dream I was out for kicks and fantasy" (11). This passage includes many words, or distinct uses of words, that are imported from 1950s America ("teenage," "rave," "man," "kicks"). As Hebdige has argued, this process represents youth subcultures challenging the dominant forms of the English establishment through the expression and appropriation of 'foreign' styles (46-51). However, MacInnes holds that American culture, as consumed by the English youth, is not portrayed as an experiential connection between the two cultures. It is rather a strategic form of escape from, and resistance to, dominant adult culture (*England* 11-19).

This process is articulated through the narrative voice in *Absolute Beginners*. The hybridized style, register and word choice of the teenager represent a form that incorporates Standard English, working-class slang, and an American youth idiom similar to that produced by the American Beat writers of the fifties. The teenager's narrative voice represents the distancing of youth from mainstream culture through an engagement with contemporary anxieties about the Americanization of English culture. This fear was acknowledged not only in mainstream cultural discourse, but also in the New Left writing of the period, especially in Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy*. In *Absolute Beginners*, MacInnes creates a linguistic style that corresponds to his reading of the popular English rock'n'roll and skiffle forms of Tommy Steele and Lonnie Donegan. In a 1958 article for *The Twentieth Century*, MacInnes writes:

English singers have gradually captured a place in the pop market [...] by learning to sing the American pop style in a manner quite indistinguishable from the real thing, so that we have the paradox that teenagers like, increasingly, songs by Englishmen in American. (*England* 49)

In *Absolute Beginners*, MacInnes attempts to translate this hybridized singing style into the narrative voice of the teenager, a form that is addressed to an English audience and is specifically concerned with English culture, but is presented through the appropriation of American forms. MacInnes's attempt to create this subcultural, hybrid language style is, therefore, part of his project to challenge dominant constructions of Englishness in terms of both language and culture.⁸

In *City of Spades*, Johnny Fortune's narration represents a similar hybridized language form. Fortune's style is presented as an appropriation, disruption and dislocation of Standard English that operates thematically and ideologically to represent an emergent national identity that includes rather than excludes members from Britain's commonwealth. The representation of Fortune's language functions in a similar way to the 'Creolization' of English in many Caribbean texts. As Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin argue:

Writers in this continuum employ highly developed strategies of code-switching and vernacular transcription, which achieve the dual result of abrogating the Standard English and appropriating an english [sic] as a culturally significant discourse. (46)

Although Fortune is from Nigeria, and not the Caribbean, his discourse functions in a similar way by transforming Standard English.

In summary, the experimentation with linguistic forms in the intersection of Standard English, Americanization and Creolization in MacInnes's novels foreground his central concern in the contemporary construction of English national identity.

Cool Britannia: Reconstructing Englishness

The 1950s represent a decade in which the construction of English national identity was undergoing radical reappraisal and re-

negotiation due to the break-up of Empire, increased immigration and the perceived threat of the Americanization of British culture.⁹ This historical context is articulated in MacInnes's novels by contradictory attitudes towards constructions of national identity.¹⁰ The novels produce a double perspective that, on the one hand, offers a critique of, yet on the other, is openly nostalgic for, traditional representations of Englishness. In Raymond Williams's terms, the texts reveal both a nostalgic longing for the "residual" *and* a celebration of the "emergent" in relation to constructions of Englishness (37-45).

In *Absolute Beginners*, the contradictory attitude towards the nature of English national identity is registered through the central consciousness of the teenager, who is unclear about which aspects of national identity he can support as reflecting his individual identity, and which he wants to reject in favour of new forms. This 'undecidability' of association with the nation is articulated in the conversation the teenager has with a South American diplomat who is in the process of writing a report on "British-folk ways": "'So you've not much to tell me of Britain and her position.' [...] '[O]nly,' I said, 'that her position is that she hasn't found her position'" (25-27). This description of national identity as fluid and unstable is informed by the contemporary 'crisis' of Britain's loss of colonial and international power, and foregrounds a moment of transition in English national identity by observing and commenting on both residual and emergent forms of Englishness. However, it is not the case that MacInnes's teenager simply rejects the residual and celebrates the emergent aspects of the contemporary national culture, rather, a more complex and contradictory attitude is presented by means of a reconstruction of the nation through a re-negotiation of traditional and new cultural forms and practices. As the teenager comments: "'You bet I'm a patriot!' I exclaimed. 'It's because I'm a patriot, that I can't bear our country'" (59).

There *is* plenty of invective about traditional forms of Englishness in the novel, especially in relation to out-of-date colonial attitudes that retain the pretence that Britain is still a major world power. For

example, the teenager tells the South American diplomat, referring to the English:

If they'd stick to their housekeeping, which is the only back-yard they can move freely in to any purpose, and stopped playing Winston Churchill and the Great Armada when there's no tin soldiers left to play with any more, then no one would despise them, because no one would even notice them. (26)

This passage reveals the text's critique of the residual forms of colonial power, which are also identified by the teenager in Britain's recent failures in international power broking:

"The war," said Vern [the teenager's elder half-brother], "was Britain's finest hour."
 "What war? You mean Cyprus, boy? Or Suez? Or Korea?"
 "No, stupid. I mean the *real* war, you don't remember."
 "Well Vernon," I said, "please believe me I'm glad I don't. All of you oldies certainly seem to try to keep it well in mind, because every time I open a newspaper, or pick up a paperback, or go to the Odeon, I hear nothing but war, war, war. You pensioners certainly seem to love that old struggle." (35)

MacInnes and the teenager base their critique on the fact that residual forms of Englishness fail to accommodate the nation's declined status in the post-colonial world.

In addition, the text argues that England has failed to take responsibility for its colonial heritage, or to recognize that it is implicated in its colonial history precisely because the exploitation of subject peoples has taken place *elsewhere*, away from the colonial centre:

For centuries [...] the English have been rich, and the price of riches is that you export reality to where it is you get your money from. And now that the market-places overseas are closing one by one, reality comes home again to roost, but no one notices it, although it's settled in to stay beside them. (98)

The failure to respond to the changing contemporary situation evidenced in dominant English society's failure to accept responsibility for past colonial exploitation is represented in *Absolute Beginners* by the presentation of racial violence in the passages describing the

Notting Hill riots. This eruption of violence is represented as a spontaneous and collective psychological reaction to contemporary anxieties about national identity amongst the dominant white population, and leads the teenager to reject the entrenched forms of Englishness:

Because in this moment, I must tell you, I'd fallen right out of love with England. And even with London, which I'd loved like my mother, in a way. As far as I was concerned, the whole dam [sic] group of islands could sink under the sea, and all I wanted was to shake my feet off of them, and take off somewhere and get naturalized, and settle. (228)

However, parallel to this critique, the text simultaneously offers a celebration of other traditional forms of national identity, which appear to be under threat from the new social and cultural forces. For example, as a contrast to the text's focus on the emergent musical form of jazz, the operettas of Gilbert and Sullivan are celebrated as a cultural expression of an older and yet still important element of a residual Englishness (132-33). Gilbert and Sullivan function in the text as a cultural signifier of a traditional construction of 'liberal' England as an honest, ordered and gentle society. In the section where the teenager goes on a boat trip with his father (who represents a gentle, quietly spoken, but solid English character), he celebrates older narratives of Englishness by appropriating royalist and pastoral images:

Up there behind us, was the enormous castle, just as you see it on screen when they play "the Queen" [...] and there out in front of us were fields and trees and cows and things and sunlight, and a huge big sky filled with acres of fresh air, and I thought my heavens! if this is the country, why haven't I shaken hands with it before—it's glorious! (172)

This nostalgic celebration of a residual English pastoral seems at odds with the teenager's encounters with the new forms of teenage and black subcultures that pervade most of the text. However, this aspect represents an attempt to reconstruct a positive, emergent national identity that is acceptable not only to the new subcultural identities the novel records, but also to the mainstream culture. This ambiva-

lence in terms of national identity serves to envisage a reconstruction of Englishness that will incorporate mainstream *and* the new identities of youth and black subcultures. The novel, therefore, attempts to appropriate these new cultures by representing them to an audience that has come to perceive them as wholly threatening to traditional national values. If MacInnes's teenager can respond to the implicit worth of certain aspects of an older English identity, then it is more palatable for dominant English culture to include these new subcultural forces into an emergent reconstruction of Englishness. It thus anticipates later discourses of a 'Cool Britannia' that appropriates youth and black subcultures in a vibrant and forward-looking construction of the nation. It is for this reason that the text ends with the poignant image of a new group of immigrants landing in England, full of hope and a reliance on the very English myths that the teenager has reproduced:

They all looked so dam [sic] pleased to be in England, at the end of their long journey, that I was heartbroken at all the disappointments that were in store for them [...] "Welcome to London! Greetings from England! Meet your first teenager! We're all going up to Napoli to have a ball!" (234-35)

This contradictory attitude to the construction of Englishness reveals the novel's engagement with contemporaneous debates on the social and political experience of Britain in the post-war period. The text enters a cultural debate concerned with defining a national identity that has been loosened from its traditional certainties, one that is no longer the property of the dominant cultural institutions, but is in the process of being reconstructed from below. Homi Bhabha, following Tom Nairn's description of the nation as "the modern Janus" (Nairn 348), identifies the "Janus-faced" ambivalence of the discourse and the language of the nation. He writes:

The 'locality' of national culture is neither unified nor unitary in relation to itself, nor must it be seen simply as 'other' in relation to what is outside or beyond it. The boundary is Janus-faced and the problem of outside/inside must always be a process of hybridity, incorporating new 'people' in rela-

tion to the body politic, generating other sites of meaning and, inevitably, in the political process, producing unmanned sites of political antagonism and unpredictable forces for political representation. (Bhabha 4)

In this passage, Bhabha identifies the fluid construction of the 'nation' that suggests that national identity is never fixed but is in a constant process of reconstruction and re-negotiation. A similar model of the nation is also assumed in *Absolute Beginners*. MacInnes's novel attempts to generate the "other sites" identified by Bhabha both in terms of meaning and through the construction of identities that engage in the ideological construction of an emergent Englishness. However, the text is also concerned to retain certain aspects of a residual Englishness. The position of the narrative voice as simultaneously inside and outside in relation to youth subcultures corresponds to this negotiated construction of the nation. The narrative occupies a space on the boundary between inside and outside: a liminal position from which it attempts to reconstruct a new national identity by re-positioning the narrative, and the reader, in relation to a moral judgement on the site of Englishness in relation to the other 'geographies' of youth and race.

Cruel Britannia: Race and Identity in *City of Spades*

MacInnes's contradictory representations of English national identity and youth are also reproduced in his representation of black subcultures. In *City of Spades*, MacInnes attempts to record faithfully the culture, concerns and experiences of emergent black communities in fifties London. In part, the text attempts to re-address the misrepresentation of these identities in the media and in the mainstream 'structure of feeling' amongst the white population towards ethnic minorities from commonwealth and decolonized countries (Williams, *Revolution* 48).

In the final section of *Absolute Beginners*, MacInnes represents mainstream attitudes to 'race' through the discussion of an article in what the teenager calls "Mrs Dale's Daily," by the fictional journalist

Ambrose Drove, representative of dominant cultural attitudes towards immigrant and black individuals (193-97). The Ambrose Drove article serves to highlight several specific racial prejudices and misrepresentations, such as: the dangerous irresponsibility of unrestricted immigration; the positioning of immigrant cultures as underdeveloped, and lacking in ethical and moral frameworks comparable to the (white) British population; anti-social and excessive behaviour; sexual promiscuity; and criminality, especially in the practice of "living off the immoral earnings of white prostitutes" (195). The fictional article places the responsibility for the incidents of racial violence in the Nottingham and Notting Hill riots in 1958 on the immigrants, implying that the racist reaction of the 'Teds' is understandable though "entirely alien to our way of life" (196). The representation of these widespread cultural beliefs corresponds to what Edward Said has defined as the "orientalism" of Western conceptions of "other" non-Western cultures. Black immigrant culture in fifties Britain is thus represented in such a cultural discourse as revealing what Said calls a "flexible positional superiority, which puts the Westerner in a whole series of relationships with the Orient [in this case read the African/Caribbean immigrant] without ever losing him the relative upper hand" (7).

City of Spades opens up a range of issues that engage with this dominant (mis)construction and stereotyping of black identity. For example, the text foregrounds the misreading of 'black' immigrants as a unified homogenous group by identifying the distinctions between separate black cultural identities resident in Britain in the 1950s, especially in the cultural differences between Caribbean, African and African American identities, and also in distinctions within those categories such as Gambian, Nigerian, and so on. Each sub-group is given its own specific identity in the text that is representative of specific national/cultural identities. The novel is also concerned with redressing the dominant (white) cultural belief that black individuals are culturally, morally, and intellectually inferior. This is achieved in two ways: firstly, through the narrative strategy of delivering half of

the narrative from the perspective and internal monologue of Johnny Fortune; and secondly, through characterization, which establishes a moral and ethical equality in terms of the practices and actions of individual characters, irrespective of cultural history and skin colour.

As Paul Gilroy has argued, discourses of the nation and 'race' have been articulated together in post-war Britain (56). Therefore, anxieties about the declining status of the nation are presented through discourses of racial prejudice that serve to focus the blame of national decline on 'alien' individuals and cultures. As Gilroy writes: "Alien cultures come to embody a threat which, in turn, invites the conclusion that national decline and weakness have been precipitated by the arrival of blacks" (46). In the fifties, the impact of decolonization and the Suez crisis intensified this racial discourse, and *City of Spades* foregrounds the contemporary expression of these anxieties about national identity.

Gilroy also posits that this connection of race and nation was specifically articulated in the 1950s through a discourse of criminality in which "issues of sexuality and miscegenation were often uppermost" (79). *City of Spades* attempts to emphasize, contextualize and contest these discourses of criminality and sexuality. The dominant cultural charge of excessive criminality among black immigrant cultures is foregrounded through the representation of the underworld activities of Billy Whispers and his followers. The emphasis throughout the text is on the sociological causes of the reliance on criminal activity among black subcultures, representing a survival strategy in response to an institutionally racist culture that limits the economic opportunities for black individuals. This position challenges the view that criminality is an intrinsic racial characteristic of immigrant lifestyle, as suggested in the Ambrose Drove article in *Absolute Beginners*. This is evidenced in the trajectory of Fortune's progress in the novel. He arrives in London as an optimistic and ambitious student but through his encounters with the racist attitudes of the 'landladies,' employers, and the police, he ultimately quits college and resorts to illicit gambling and selling 'weed' to make a living.

MacInnes also engages with the trope of miscegenation as identified by Gilroy in discourses of race and nation in the fifties. In *Absolute Beginners*, MacInnes records this fear of miscegenation in the Ambrose Drove article:

To begin with, he [Ambrose Drove] said, mixed marriages—as responsible coloured persons would be the very first to agree themselves—were most undesirable. They led to a mongrel race, inferior physically and mentally, and rejected by both of the unadulterated communities. (194-95)

This cultural anxiety is represented in *City of Spades* through the various sexual relationships Johnny Fortune has with white women. This can be seen, for example, in one of the 'interludes' included in the text, where Fortune and his white lover Muriel take a boat trip on the Thames.¹¹ The possibility of a 'mixed marriage' between the two characters is proposed, and the idyllic surroundings of this episode make this anticipated future a tangible possibility. The escape from central London in this section thus represents an escape from the dominant social and cultural mores that would make any such marriage difficult. This escape, however, is only temporary as it becomes clear that the pleasure steamer is on a non-stop round trip jettisoning the couple back into the very social and cultural environment that would oppose their relationship:

Muriel called out to the helmsman. "Can't we get off?"

"Get off, miss? No, we don't stop."

"But it said it was an excursion to Greenwich Palace."

"This is the excursion, miss. We take you there and back, to see it, but you get off where you came from in the City." (106)

This journey represents a tantalizing glimpse of the possibility of a non-racist future that is, nevertheless, prohibited for the two lovers in the present. The text goes on to describe how the pressures of society gradually and stealthily undermine the possibility of this 'mixed-race' relationship. This aspect of the novel represents a negotiation of the cultural anxieties of dominant white society through the perspective of a heterosexual 'mixed-race' couple. The narrative thus reflects these anxieties back towards the culture from which they are produced,

'denaturalizing' concerns of miscegenation prevalent in dominant cultural discourse. The text also challenges the dominant cultural stereotype of black individuals as sexually promiscuous by projecting sexual desire onto the white female characters of the text, in particular Theodora Pace, Dorothy, and Muriel, and away from Fortune himself.

However, despite the attempts to redress the misconceptions and prejudices observed in dominant white culture towards marginalized immigrant cultures, the text also engages in a discourse of 're-orientalizing' black identity through the process of exoticizing and eroticizing black individuals, revealing an ambivalent attitude to constructions of a black 'other.' In this sense, the text reinforces rather than challenges the Euro-centric cultural practice of projecting white exotic and erotic desire onto the imagined bodies of oriental and black individuals. This process, although on the surface challenged by the novel, is re-inscribed through a double move it makes in relation to the representation of black identity.

The description of the discrete subcultural world of the immigrants is exoticized in the text through the perspective of Montgomery Pew's exploration of the 'dangerous' spaces of this subculture. For example, Pew's decision to visit the "Moorhen Public House, the Cosmopolitan dance hall, or the Moonbeam club" that represent the spaces of black subcultural existence, is initially prohibited by the governmental department's guidelines on "Bad People and Places to Avoid" (11). Pew's visit to these prohibited spaces is therefore represented as a transgression from the homogeneous forces of dominant society into the heterogeneous world of London's black subcultures. This transgression is celebrated in the text, but the implication that black culture inherently represents transgression is maintained rather than challenged, reinforcing, rather than negating, the process of orientalizing black identity from the perspective of the white observer. Black subcultural practice is re-inscribed in the text as a representation of a white desire to engage in the exotic/erotic world of the black 'other.'

As with the representation of youth subcultures and national identity in *Absolute Beginners*, *City of Spades* represents a Janus-faced

construction of black identity, which reveals both the anxieties and desires of fifties culture in relation to the construction of the racial other. Therefore, MacInnes's text constitutes a double perspective of representation. On the one hand, it provides an attempt to record or 'speak' in the authentic voice of a 1950s London black subcultural identity, removing the 'silence' of this group in dominant cultural discourses. On the other hand, this representation stems from a white cultural perspective, resulting in a paradoxical artificial construction of an 'authentic' black voice. Perhaps this is as far as MacInnes could go in terms of the representation of a culture that remains 'other' to the projected implied readership or interpretive community of the text, which would have been predominantly white. Despite its shortcomings, however, the text (and *Absolute Beginners*) represents a celebration of the possibility of an emergent form of national identity that is plural, multicultural and heterogeneous, rejecting univocal constructions of Englishness based on past myths of English imperial greatness.

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NOTES

¹There are complexities involved in the construction of 'authentic' subcultural voices in literary texts. Both *Absolute Beginners* and *City of Spades* produce a paradoxical verification of the authenticity and authority of marginalized narrative perspectives through the construction of stylized linguistic registers. The novels do not transparently 'reflect' the language styles used by fifties teenage and black subcultures, rather they produce, in a linguistic form, the *function* of style as difference, through the use of unofficial language that positions subcultural identity as distinct from dominant culture. The voices used in the text, therefore, are not authentic in an ethnographic sense, but are an attempt to represent an 'authentic' sense of difference between the subculture and the dominant or parent culture.

²I quote Walter Benjamin here because there is a similarity with MacInnes's aim to represent marginal or subcultural voices that are in danger of being overlooked by dominant society. This is, in Benjamin's words, to "[...] seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger" (Benjamin 247).

³Here, I am using 'implied reader' in the narratological sense: as the text's internally constructed projection of the social or cultural group it is addressing. Of course the novel has no control over 'real' readers and how they might receive and interpret the text. For useful definitions of 'implied' and 'real' readers see Rimmon-Kenan 86-89.

⁴The narrative structure thereby produces a dual narrative of inclusion and exclusion in relation to Steven Connor's model of "addressivity" (Connor 8-13).

⁵I refer to Gerard Genette's use of the terms heterodiegetic and homodiegetic in relation to his typology of narrators (Genette 255-56).

⁶Bakhtin writes: "Alongside the centripetal forces, the centrifugal forces of language carry on their uninterrupted work: alongside verbal-ideological-centralization and unification, the uninterrupted processes of decentralization and disunification go forward" (Bakhtin 272).

⁷For a discussion of the relationship between English youth and American pop influences in the 1950s, see MacInnes's essays "Young England, Half English" and "Pop Songs and Teenagers," *England* 11-18; 45-59.

⁸The multiple perspective of the narrative voice in the novel has a corresponding effect in the characterization, as the main characters are given hybridized national identities, which foregrounds inconsistencies in the dominant construction of a unified Englishness based on racial 'purity.' Both the teenage hero and "Crepe Suzette," the main female character in the novel, represent a celebration of hybridized identity, "So you realize Suze is a sharp gal, and no doubt this is because she's not English, but part Gibraltar, partly Scotch and partly Jewish, which is perhaps why I get along with her, as I'm supposed to have a bit of Jewish blood from my mother's veins as well [...]" (16-17). MacInnes deploys these hybrid identities to strategically place their perspectival view on the margins of dominant English society.

⁹The specific relationship between Britain and England, in geographical and political terms, problematizes the construction of identity in terms of the nation. This confusion of terms is also registered in MacInnes's treatment of them in the novel.

¹⁰MacInnes's position as a 'post-colonial' writer appears to contribute to his fascination with English national identity. MacInnes, son of author Angela Thirkell, was born in London in 1914, but was brought up in Australia from 1919 onwards, returning to London in 1936. Tony Gould's biography provides a good account of MacInnes's life and works.

¹¹There are two 'interludes' in the *City of Spades*, both of which are presented in a third person, heterodiegetic narrative that claims an external position to the first person narratives of Pew and Fortune.

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