

Anglistentag 2015
University of Paderborn



SECTION 2: READING MULTIRACIALITY IN ANGLOPHONE NARRATIVES

Organised by Miriam Nandi (Freiburg) und Jan Alber (Aarhus)

Abstract Section 2

Hanif Kureishi's seminal novel *The Buddha of Suburbia* famously opens with the following words: "My name is Karim Ameer, and I am an Englishman born-and-bred, almost." (1990: 7) The mixed-race narrator-protagonist of British-Pakistani descent is thus an example of a hybrid type of identity that plays a crucial role in our globalized world. The identity of US President Barack Obama is equally ambivalent. On the one hand, he is an international figure with a widely recognized multiracial and multinational history. On the other hand, his affiliations and his community activism focus on African Americans, and he may well define himself as African American personally, even though his mother is white as the editors of the forthcoming volume *Global Mixed Race* remind us (King O'Brien, Mathani, Small, Spickard 2014). Does this mean that multiracial individuals like Karim Ameer or Barack Obama have to "choose" between either of the two communities they descend from? Or are there other options such as identifying oneself as "mixed" rather than black or white? How do factors like class, tradition, and societal hierarchies determine people's attitude towards multiraciality?

This panel seeks to address these questions by looking at representations of racially ambiguous individuals in Anglophone literatures and cultures from all over the globe, while keeping in mind the violent colonial encounters (such as transatlantic slavery or the process of colonialization) that have in many cases formed the foundations of multiraciality in the Anglophone world. We are particularly interested in the question of how multiraciality as a specific form of hybridity destabilizes fixed identities and pre-conceptions of "blackness" and "whiteness". We welcome papers focussing on "Black" British fiction, "half-caste" Aborigines, or other manifestations of multiraciality in cultural productions from Africa, Canada, India, New Zealand, and so forth, as well as on critical (mixed) race theory. The papers may deal with mixed-race individuals in a wide variety of different media or genres (such as literature, comic books, film, television series, Youtube videos, dance performances, and so forth).

**Thursday, 24 September 2015
11.00-11.15am
Introduction**

11.15am-12.00noon
Christoph Ehland (Paderborn)
The Impossible Quest of the Middlebrow Hero:
Racial Tension, Colonial Angst, and Cultural Curiosity

Canonised British writing on India of the early twentieth century often remains curiously silent about the possibility of interracial marriage and multicultural identity. Household names such as E.M. Forster or George Orwell seem to shy away from the inevitable ambiguities that these issues imply. In *Burmese Days* Orwell may allow a number of Eurasians and other characters "of uncertain race" (Orwell 2001: 281) an appearance in the text but their presence remains inconsequential. They remain on the margin not only of the depiction of colonial society but also of Orwell's narrative concern which is firmly focused on the clash between fixed racial identities rather than their intermixture. Similarly, in Forster's novel *A Passage to India* ethnic boundaries between the Indians and the British remain curiously untouched although the alleged rape of Miss Quested by the Indian doctor Aziz raises the darkest of interracial fears in the fictional British community.

In face of the obvious reluctance of the avant-garde writers of the time to engage to any greater degree with the issue of multiraciality in their writing on India one should expect that the more popular strand of literature necessarily ignored the topic altogether. However, the contrary is true: Anglo-Indian writers of the period such as B.M. Croker or Maud Divers dared to position ambiguous racial identities in the centre of their narratives. This paper will aim to explore the perspective of middlebrow writing with regard to the aspect of race and multiraciality. It will discuss how the cultural compass of middlebrow writers can alternate between the colonial angst of racial contamination and a remarkable degree of interracial curiosity.

B.M. Croker, remembered today – if at all – for her exotic ghost stories, sends the protagonist of her novel *In Old Madras* (1911) on a quest through large parts of the Indian subcontinent. His journey serves to paint a profoundly unsettling picture of the psychological hinterland of British colonial society and reveals the challenge of interracial encounters. Where Croker investigates the multiracial layers of the colonial endeavour Maud Diver's novel *Lilamani* (1928) dares to imagine the possibilities of an interracial relationship. Her female Indian protagonist is taken to Europe as part of a suffragette educational project. Eventually, the narrative exploitation of the obvious exoticism of the protagonist gives way to an intercultural exchange that oscillates between the confirmation of fixed ethnic identities and the urge to overcome their limitations.

The discussion in this paper will situate the racial debate in middlebrow writing by Croker and Divers in the wider contexts of the ever more shifting gender and class demarcations of the period 1900-1930. In this context it will investigate the strategies of control if not containment that allowed middlebrow writers to explore the kind of racial ambivalence from which other writers of their time still shied away.

12.00noon-12.45pm
Christine Vogt-William (Berlin)
Split Me in Two: Gender, Mixed Race Relations and Dougla Identities
in Indo-Caribbean Women's Fiction.

The focus of my paper will be on how gender and mixed race relations are addressed in novels by Indo-Trinidadian-Canadian writers Ramabai Espinet and Shani Mootoo. The genre of the novel could be read as an adequate site to address the interrogation of hybrid identities with a view to engendering a Caribbean feminist dougla poetics, since literature is “a medium that is not understood to be exclusively the cultural capital of Indo- or Afro-Trinidadians” (Puri, 2004: 206). Once a pejorative term in Hindi meaning ‘bastard’, dougla is used nowadays to designate those of African and Indian parentage in the Caribbean. Indo-Caribbean culture, history and literature cannot be examined without acknowledging the transcultural aspects of dougla heritages. Gender roles and expectations from both Indo-Caribbean and Afro-Caribbean communities inform and complicate racial relations – factors which are rendered even more complex due to the histories of slavery and indentured labour. In view of these histories, I read *The Swinging Bridge* (Espinete) and *He Drown She in the Sea* (Mootoo) with the aim of charting spaces to articulate alternative perspectives normally disallowed by hegemonic racial representations (Afro-Creole and Indian “Mother Culture”), which also repress the gender and class inequalities within Afro-Caribbean and Indo-Caribbean communities. These spaces then might articulate the dougla potential of disrupting dominant racial and gendered stereotypes, thus allowing for specifically transcultural feminist interventions in prevalent gender and race representations.

4.00-4.45pm
Julia Hoydis (Köln)
All's Turning Black: Mixed-Race Identity Politics and
(Post-)Apocalyptic Fantasy in Nalo Hopkinson's *The Chaos*

Caribbean-Canadian author Nalo Hopkinson is known for writing speculative fictions, which mix elements of sci-fi, fantasy, and Jamaican folklore, and feature black female protagonists. Part of the subversive appeal of Hopkinson's novels is the fusion and reappropriation of white/black narrative traditions, and they thus raise the issue of mixed 'raciality' already on the level of genre(s). Often engaging with matters of race, sexuality, and discrimination in coming-of-age plots, the author's first young adult novel, *The Chaos* (2012), deals explicitly with the topic of teen-aged mixed-race identity.

Set in Toronto, it tells the story of sixteen-year-old Sojourner ('Scotch'), daughter of a black Afro-American mother and a white Jamaican father. In contrast to her much darker brother, Scotch can 'pass' as white, which she, however, refuses to do. The realist high-school plot and its age-typical 'body' issues are soon disrupted by Scotch's suffering from a strange (and highly symbolic) dermatological condition, which covers her whole body in a sticky, black substance and slowly turns her into a "tar-baby." Adding to this, chaos erupts in the form of a giant bubble and active volcano emerging from Lake Ontario. Isolated from her friends and family, Scotch has to fight against some scary figures of Jamaican folklore that take over the city. The novel presents an eclectic mix of didacticism, horror and humour. Sporting a cast of characters of various colours, (dis)abilities, and sexualities, it examines the complexities of multi-raciality, as well the nature of racism and 'other' prejudices, showing identities essentially as fluid. Perhaps most importantly, Hopkinson's text presents a mixed-race protagonist, who is a far cry from the archetype of the

"tragic mulatta" (cf. Dagbovie-Mullins 2013: 21f; Béltran/Fojos 2008: 4f) and a twist to the motif of "passing," ending with Scotch sitting safely in school, back in her old skin, yet thrilled about looking much darker, "because then no one will ever again tell me that I don't look black" (*Chaos*, 239).

4.45-5.30pm

Felicitas Meifert-Menhard (München)

Black, White, Just Right!

Narrating and Illustrating Multiracial Identity in Children's Literature

In their comprehensive empirical study on multiracial literature for children, Amina Chaudhri and William H. Teale observe that "[l]iterature plays a key role in telling the counterstories, adding to the diversity of human experiences. Children's books that include mixed race characters have the potential to add to the diversity in that they may interrupt the focus on (assumed) monoracial identity" (2013: 359-76). The issue of identity-formation is, of course, especially prevalent in children's fiction, and the question of how young mixed-race characters are portrayed in their search for self and belonging is at the very heart of a critical evaluation of such books. This paper will be especially interested in the *visual* transmission of multiracial identity (in picture books such as *Black, White, Just Right!* or *black is brown is tan*, both of which play on the differentiation and/or mixing of different 'colours' in their very title) and its combination with *verbal* codes of rhyme, verse, and story to create multimodal textual experiences that tell of a child's attitude to his/her multiracial self. It will also, however, have a look at texts geared toward older children and young adults and examine how questions of family structure, socioeconomic circumstances, as well as the race of an individual parent and the child's relation to that parent all contribute to the evaluation of how the young protagonists grapple and/or come to terms with their individual racial identity.

Friday, 25 September 2015

3.00-3.45pm

Nicole Falkenhayner (Freiburg)

"Global Mixed Race" after Identity: Following the Narratives of Kureishi and Smith at the Height of the Hybridity Paradigm and During the Backlash against Multiculturalism

In the 1990s, "identity" became one of the most productive notions in cultural and literary studies. Most of the new paradigms that developed in this decade stressed the new fluidity of identifications, from Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity (*The Location of Culture*, 1994) to Arjun Appadurai's globalized cultural "scapes" that flow, disconnected from their original cultural locations, with the migrants of globalization (*Modernity at Large*, 1996). So-called "hyphenated" identities were the focus of numerous studies in literary and cultural studies. In the 2000s, however, both the concept of hybridity and the way in which studies aligning themselves with the notion assessed their very object of analysis were increasingly criticized, not only from conservative circles, but often from the most progressive thinkers. Leslie Adelson's 2003 intervention, "Against Between. A Manifesto", argued that looking for the "in-between" ensures that we miss the most interesting points of literature of migration, cultural and racial hybridity. Other scholars have argued that the liberating ideas of hybridity and 'flows' have been perverted

because the concept of subjectivity they envision is exactly what late capitalism demands (e.g. Sandro Mezzadra 2008).

In a very different arena of discourse, political multiculturalism has experienced a backlash and has been all but vilified (not only) in Great Britain (Vertovec 2011). How are these developments in theory and politics reflected in the novels of two of the mixed-race "superstars" of multicultural Britain, Hanif Kureishi and Zadie Smith? Comparing their canonic narratives from the late 1990s with their most recent novels, the paper will be searching for literary reflections of changing attitudes towards hybridity and mixedness in the last twenty years. The idea of "global mixed-race" stands squarely within frictions between the increasingly mixed reality of our societies, the "glamour" of hybrid celebrities as an ideal of a positive view of globalisation, and an undercurrent of political backlash against progressive conceptions of culture and descent – but also progressive theorists' views that new notions are needed to liberate identities. The texts of Hanif Kureishi and Zadie Smith reveal the 'nineties obsession with identity, as well as the change of the mixed-race protagonist from a marginalized figure to a figure of envy – and dreams of a loss of identity. The paper will address these issues regarding the multicultural 'classics' *White Teeth* (Smith 2000) and *Black Album* (Kureishi 1996) in comparison with more recent works such as *N-W* (Smith 2012), *Something to Tell You* (Kureishi 2008) and *The Last Word* (Kureishi 2014).

3.45-4.30pm

Corinna Lenhardt (Münster)

"As bones dig mass racial graves" –

The Gothic Excess of Multiraciality in Larissa Lai's Long Poem "Nascent Fashion"

Gothic, as Fred Botting has famously described it, is the "writing of excess". Haunted castles, stifling labyrinths, trap doors and hidden passages, darkness that is only seldom and sparsely illuminated by dim moonlight, the villain and his disfigured but humble servant, the pursued fair maiden and her just as fair savior in the hour of need – these conventional and very familiar settings, props, and characters of the Gothic are designed to stage excess. This "horror of the spectacle" (Horace Walpole), i.e., the explicit staging of violence and villainous deviance as visible and witnessable horror events, depends crucially on racial visibility and racial otherness in relation to the reader, as well as to the other characters. Put bluntly, in Gothic fiction, the black guy is the bad guy and his excess is an inherently racial marker.

In "Nascent Fashion", her long poem of 2009, Chinese Canadian poet, writer, and critic Larissa Lai not only utilizes a great variety of Gothic writing conventions to address "contemporary war and its excesses" (*Automaton Biographies*, jacket text); but also explicitly draws upon Gothic's long history of racialization and integrates both mainstream and subversive Gothic writing strategies for constructing and performing race and multiraciality. Informed by Postcolonial Studies and Critical Race Theory, my paper carefully dissects Lai's long poem and discusses its manifold staging of Gothic excess, paying special attention to the construction of race and multiraciality. My aim is to add a fresh perspective to the construction of multiraciality in contemporary Asian Canadian poetry and to initiate a necessary scholarly debate on "Nascent Fashion".

4.30-4.45 pm

Closing remarks