


Sleuthing Ethnicity

The Detective in Multiethnic Crime Fiction



**Edited by
Dorothea Fischer-Hewson
and
Monika Meiller**

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Introduction

DOROTHEA FISCHER-HORNUNG
and MONIKA MUELLER

ETHNIC DETECTIVES SEEM TO BE EVERYWHERE. IN GERMANY, ON THE TELEVISION series *Sinan Toprak—The Incorruptible*, the smart Turkish detective on the German police force is played by the Turkish German former Armani model Erol Sander, an actor whose pseudonym resonates with a touch of Errol Flynn and whose looks suggest Rock Hudson or Cary Grant. Toprak dresses like James Bond and drives a 1972 vintage Mercedes convertible. He speaks impeccable German—without any Turkish accent whatsoever—lives in an apartment that appears to have been designed by Charles Eames and Verner Panton, has a charming blonde German wife, and a daughter with a Scandinavian first name. References to his ethnic background occur only through the occasional well-placed short hint. The television series is advertised by its producers as a first attempt to focus on a representative of the sizable Turkish population in Germany distinct from the stereotype of the Turk as the friendly owner of the Turkish kebab joint or mom-and-pop store. And Toprak certainly does not even faintly recall the more malicious stereotype of the swarthy, small-time criminal. Nevertheless, the figure of Sinan Toprak has met with mixed reactions. Some reviewers have lauded the series as “multicultural and critical of contemporary society” and a good parody of classical detective series like James Bond,¹ whereas others have complained that the detective, a “Turkish-Not-Turk,”² seems to be “as ready for violence as a sterilized washrag,” and that he is multicultural only in that he represents the bland world of international advertising and modeling.³

The example of Sinan Toprak demonstrates that the ethnic detective has moved beyond countries that have a long standing history of immigration, such as the United States and Australia, and has arrived in an increasingly multicultural Europe. It also raises the question of what the term “ethnicity” designates and “how ethnic” a detective stemming from a

nondominant population group actually has to be in order to represent cultural alterity—or if s/he is even obliged to represent alterity within “mainstream” culture at all.⁴ Issues such as these were the primary focus of discussion in our workshop “Sleuthing Ethnicity” at the Second MELUS Europe/First MESEA⁵ conference in Orléans, France, in June 2000, and are explored in this collection of essays. With our decision to include a section on ethnic detectives outside the United States in this volume, we want to reflect MESEA’s new emphasis on European and even global issues, thereby expanding the scope of critical studies on ethnic detective fiction.

During the last two decades, detective fiction has emerged as a literary field worthy of academic attention. Ethnic detective novels have by now become an accepted subgenre of detective fiction, as recent publications of several monographs and volumes of essays on the subject show. As with academic publications on detective fiction by women (which usually feature more or less hard-boiled female sleuths), critical studies about ethnic detective fiction often address the genre modifications effected by the subgenre. In ethnic detective fiction the importance of the detective’s community of origin often supersedes the traditional loneliness of the detective. Sometimes the “ethnic plot,” frequently dealing with aspects of the traditional way of life of the community from which the detective derives, also seems to diminish the importance of the detective plot. Furthermore, ethnic detective novels address issues of personal and social identity that reflect the importance of the ethnic community for the particular detective. The intensity of the detective’s negotiation of his or her ethnic identity tends to directly correlate with the distance that the detective’s particular ethnic group has from “mainstream” society.

The sleuths of Native American detective fiction, for example, usually live on the reservation and actively participate in their tribal tradition. Often they administer justice according to their own understanding of it rather than the letter of the dominant culture’s law, as, for example, tribal policeman Jim Chee does in Tony Hillerman’s *The Dark Wind* when he disposes of \$15 million worth of cocaine without letting anybody know about it. If they have become alienated from traditional society, they often come to realize that they cannot have it both ways—to be Native American and Anglo at the same time. Thus, some Native American detective fiction presents us with detectives who return to their community after having worked for the FBI (for example, Aimée and David Thurlo’s Ella Clah and Dana Stabenow’s Aleut detective Kate Shugak).

Detectives who are members of ethnic groups that are more assimilated into “mainstream” society are involved in different negotiations of identity, which often seem to pose the question of whether race is more important than culture in constituting identity or vice versa. Thus, Dale

Furutani’s Japanese American sleuth, Ken Tanaka, goes to Japan, partly in order to solve a crime and partly in quest of racial acceptance in his country of origin, but Tanaka realizes that he will ultimately remain a stranger in Japan, since his cultural affiliation is predominantly American. African American writer Barbara Neely, however, wants to counteract the once brutally forced acculturation of African Americans by having her amateur detective, Blanche White, reclaim her African cultural roots by worshipping in front of an ancestor altar and by developing an increasingly black separatist stance as the Blanche White series progresses.

The essays collected in this volume reflect these established issues of ethnic detective fiction but also move beyond them by focusing on wider topics: the intersection of ethnicity and gender; marketing strategies for ethnic mysteries; juvenile ethnic detective literature; changing sexual politics as reflected in the remake of a classic blaxploitation film series; and historical ethnic crime as mirrored in fictions of detection. The additional focus on recent non-U.S. ethnic detective fiction in this collection of essays redirects attention to questions of authenticity, authority, and stereotyping—like the television series *Sinan Toprak—The Incorruptible* discussed initially.

Among the authors included in the non-U.S. section, only Val McDermid, who alludes to the long-standing cultural conflict between the Scottish and the English in her Lindsay Gordon series, writes from an insider’s perspective. All of the other recent novels discussed (with the exception of Australian Sally Morgan’s *My Place*, which is fiction of detection but not “classic” detective fiction) are authored by cultural outsiders, who, nevertheless, like the creators of *Sinan Toprak*, carefully attempted to avoid stereotypical references to the ethnicities portrayed in their novels. Arthur Upfield, who from the late twenties until the early sixties wrote his Inspector Bony novels, featuring a detective who is part-Aboriginal, provides an exception to this rule, since his novels still betray instances of inadvertent racialism. The other authors, however, try to be as “ethnically correct” as Tony Hillerman, the Anglo “father” of Native American detective fiction. But unlike Hillerman who, through meticulous anthropological research, succeeded in authoring culturally credible novels featuring Navajo, Hopi, and Zuni detectives,⁶ the first generation of European authors of ethnic detective fiction seems to have mostly shied away from extensive research that would enable more than a degree of ethnic authenticity.

Thus, German author Jakob Arjouni (who acquired his Moroccan last name through marriage) elegantly circumvents his lack of knowledge about his detective Kemal Kayankaya’s Turkish background by leaving Kemal himself in the dark about his own culture since he was adopted by a German

couple as a baby. French author Jean-Christophe Grangé makes his French-Arab detective, Karim Abdouf, a partner to the French star inspector Pierre Niémans and does not devote a lot of attention to Abdouf's background, which is similar to Kemal's in that he was raised in a French orphanage. Like Arjouni, Grangé references ethnicity primarily by means of the discrimination suffered by the ethnic protagonist;⁷ moreover, he includes a larger thematic focus on Nazism and eugenic racial engineering. Only German American author Irene Dische, whose novel *Ein Job* (A Job)⁸ thematizes the devastating—but ultimately humanizing—cultural confusion that her Kurdish hard-boiled assassin, Alan Korkunç, suffers in New York, seems to have "authenticated" her novel's cultural background through collaboration with Nizamettin Ariç. He is listed as coauthor of the movie script *The Assassin's Last Killing*, on which *A Job* is based. It thus seems that there is still much cultural work left to be done for later generations of immigrants in Europe, who undoubtedly will eventually also contribute to European ethnic detective fiction.

The papers collected in this volume have been divided into three segments: "Historicizing Ethnicity," "Comparing Ethnic Identities," and "Globalizing Ethnicity." In her introductory essay, Marina Cacioppo takes a historical look at early ethnic detectives and investigates how Garibaldi Marto Lapolla, Prosper Buranelli, and Rudolph Fisher have incorporated their own ethnic settings and characters into hard-boiled and classic mystery fiction genres. By supplying an insider's perspective on their neighborhoods, they challenge dominant representations of Little Italies and Harlem as dangerous, atavistic, and exotic. The three writers, moreover, accomplish this reworking of the genres by introducing ethnic detectives whose ethnicity is an essential element of crime solving.

Theo D'haen, in his essay on Asian American detective fiction, calls attention to the fact that in the wake of the massive upsurge in crime writing in the United States, the 1990s have seen the emergence of countless ethnic crime fighters. D'haen also stresses that recent studies on detective fiction call attention to submerged ethnic plots in classic hard-boiled fiction. He compares Asian American detective fictions by three authors: Japanese American crime writer Dale Furutani; Chinese American detective fiction writer S. J. Rozan; and the historical detective fictions writer Laura Joh Rowland, who sets her novels in seventeenth-century Japan although she is Chinese American. Throughout his paper, D'haen concentrates on the intersection of crime, history, nationality, ethnicity, and gender and shows how the three authors work toward a hybridity of Asian traditionalism and American individualism.

Addressing similar concerns about tradition and change in her paper about ethnicity in Jewish American detective fiction, Carmen Birkle argues

that Harry Kemelman, Faye Kellerman, and Ed Goldberg represent different forms of Jewishness in their writing. In contrast to Kemelman and Kellerman, who use their fiction to explain Conservative and Orthodox Judaism to Jews and Gentiles alike, Goldberg focuses more on the vanishing relevance of Judaism in his protagonist-detective's everyday life, emphasizing his embeddedness in the multicultural and transculturating society of New York City. All three authors negotiate ideas of self and other, and they reject notions of fixed identities and universalized "Jewishness," but still pose Judaism as determinant in the lives of all the Jewish characters.

Ann-Catherine Geuder introduces an entirely different focus on the significance of ethnicity by discussing the marketing strategies for Rudolfo Anaya's trilogy *Zia Summer*, *Rio Grande Fall*, and *Shaman Winter*, which combines its ethnic concerns with elements of detective fiction. His texts draw their strength from the traditions of their protagonists' Indo-Hispanic roots, yet at the same time they also captivate his readers' attention with suspense and mystery. Geuder argues that Anaya's publishers have assumed it advantageous to market the novels only as mysteries, stressing this aspect while ignoring the cultural elements. Critics, however, have tried to correct this misrepresentation in their reviews, but their exclusive focus on the cultural and spiritual levels of the novels tends to downplay the mystery aspect.

In her analysis of Chicano/a and African American detective fiction, Carmen Flys-Junquera demonstrates that contemporary ethnic detective writers use the popular genre of detective fiction to subvert the underlying value system of the dominant cultural ethos in the United States. She focuses on the portrayal of different belief systems, particularly that of folk beliefs and so-called superstition, that reveal an alternative worldview. Her article explores the representation of these belief systems as characteristics of ethnic pride and identity in the detective fiction of Rudolfo Anaya, Lucha Corpi, Walter Mosley, Barbara Neely, and Ishmael Reed. She concludes that by writing against the grain, these authors endow the formula of detective fiction with new meanings.

Monika Mueller addresses the intersection of ethnicity and gender in her paper. She argues that even though both Cuban American writer Carolina Garcia-Aguilera and African American author Barbara Neely deal with the relationship of crime, gender, and ethnicity, their works, nevertheless, position themselves in different traditions of detective fiction, reflecting the two writers' diverging personal and social agendas. Garcia-Aguilera rewrites the hard-boiled genre by parodying the hard-boiled mode, yet she ultimately confirms the social status quo by endorsing a male world and a hegemonic capitalist social order through her portrayal of the glamorous

lives of wealthy Cuban immigrants in Miami. Neely, however, focuses on domestic mystery plots in her Blanche White novels but finally privileges her commitment to the depiction of gendered and racialized social problems over her detective plots.

Newark, New Jersey, with its specific racial and ethnic history, provides the background for Valerie Wilson Wesley's Tamara Hayle novels. As Carmen Birkle argues, the city essentially becomes an additional character in the series. Birkle investigates the spaces the city provides for Wesley's African American female detective. In contrast to the classic hard-boiled portrayal of the city as dangerous and destructive, Wesley stresses that Newark is also a site of empowerment for Tamara Hayle's private and professional life.

Two U.S. juvenile ethnic detective novels are discussed by Sabine Steinisch in the light of postcolonial theories of diasporic identities. She compares how experiences of exile and dispossession, of loss of roots and cultural displacement, are represented in *Thief of Hearts* by Chinese American writer Laurence Yep and in *The Disappearance* by Rosa Guy. Guy immigrated to the United States from Trinidad and writes about a young black man from Harlem in *The Disappearance*. Steinisch concludes that by offering new ways of thinking about ethnic identities, Yep and Guy heighten their young readers' awareness of what it means to live in a hybrid society.

Stephanie Brown's essay explores the revisions of the original *Shaft* films by the recent remake of *Shaft* (2000). She argues that the new film, part remake and part sequel, most notably through its erasure of sexuality, with extreme violence taking the place of sex, offers a substantial revision of the "black private dick who's a sex machine to all the chicks." *Shaft*'s new protagonist is in the tradition of the loner detective hero for whom women are at best a distraction and at worst a threat. But the narrative also harks back to a pre-civil rights-era tradition in African American protest literature, in which an idealized black character is undone by a racist system that accuses him of errant sexual desires vis-à-vis white women and then punishes him for a nonexistent offense. Brown contends that in "postfeminist" America, there is no place for the sexism of the original *Shaft*, even as parody.

Identity formation is the focus of Alison D. Goeller's analysis of Walter Mosley's and Tony Hillerman's detective fiction. She explores how detection takes on existential dimensions for both the African American and the Native American sleuths. In trying to solve the crimes, they are also trying to solve their personal mysteries concerning who and what they want to be in a society where they are essentially invisible and treated as second-class citizens. Both Hillerman's and Mosley's ethnic detectives investigate the

immediate, obvious crimes that are solved at the end of the novel and the larger, more pervasive crimes of social injustice that are not resolved.

Katrin Fischer deals with related issues of personal and collective identity in Aimée and David Thurlo's series about Navajo tribal policewoman Ella Clah. By focusing on Clah's intricate personal story, Fischer shows that Aimée and David Thurlo successfully integrate a modern woman sleuth and an age-old culture, and she also demonstrates that the mystery genre can be a device for discussing cross-cultural themes as well as for exploring gender and ethnicity.

According to Esther Fritsch and Marion Gymnich, Native American authors Louis Owens and Sherman Alexie make extensive use of ethnographic detail to modify the genre of crime fiction in order to validate Native American cultures. Both in Owens's *The Sharpest Sight* and *Bone Game* as well as in Alexie's *Indian Killer*, culture-specific concepts play a decisive role in the crimes as well as in their solutions. The detectives are often guided by visionary dreams and by the interference of ghosts; they rely on communal efforts rather than on deductive reasoning and more genre-bound Western investigative methods. The foregrounding of the supernatural has a dual function in these novels: it subverts conventions of traditional crime fiction and lends authority to alternative conceptions of reality.

With her paper on Val McDermid's Lindsay Gordon mysteries, Samantha Hume moves the ethnic detectives presented in this volume away from the United States. She argues that McDermid's series highlights the main elements of Gordon's identity as a socialist lesbian feminist. In addition, Hume discusses how Gordon's Scottish heritage, exemplified by her strong socialist convictions and sense of justice, informs her behavior as a detective. She also focuses on issues typical to the genre, such as the private detective's problematic relationship with the police. Hume's paper concludes with a discussion of how the novel's subversive elements, which result from her detective's "subversive identity," serve to challenge the conventions of the genre per se.

Konstanze Kutzbach compares the identity quest of Germany's first ethnic detective, Jakob Arjouni's hard-boiled Turkish German investigator, Kemal Kayankaya, to that of Irene Dische's Kurdish hard-boiled assassin, Alan Korkunç. She concludes that both men—Kemal, who looks Turkish, but knows little about his culture of origin, and Alan, who completely loses his cultural bearings in New York—use hard-boiled behavior to counteract their cultural confusion. While Kayankaya holds on to his dual identity through a tenuous reconciliation of the conflicting ethnic discourses that constitute his personality, Alan, victimized by a plethora of ethnic and cultural discourses, undergoes a complete personality change from Kurdish assassin to American gas station owner.

In the same vein, Dorothea Fischer-Hornung contends that Jean-Christophe Grangé addresses a similar problem in *Blood-Red Rivers* (2000) by combining the stories of a pair of doppelgänger detectives in two seemingly unconnected investigations after a dismembered corpse is discovered near Grenoble and a child's tomb is desecrated in a small French village. His French-Arab investigator, Karim Abdouf, a dreadlocked, earring-wearing former car thief, is a frustrated police officer who, although he was raised in France and has no connection to the Maghreb but for his appearance, is reduced to his status as the Arab Other. Pierre Niémans, a French detective who is trying to escape from the force of his own uncontrolled violence, also suffers from fundamental alienation from French society. Niémans unearths a diabolical plot to create a superrace using eugenic methods, while Abdouf investigates a seemingly insignificant and unrelated burglary and grave desecration. Eventually, the two cases are joined: alienation and otherness are posited as the major force in the crimes as well as in the detectives' solution of them. Thus, Grangé's novel explores and challenges the interpretive paradigms surrounding the postcolonial situation of Arab alterity in France, while simultaneously "unfixing" the fixity of "Frenchness."

Russell West's concluding essay takes us to Australia, the home of one of the first ethnic detectives, Arthur Upfield's part-Aboriginal detective inspector Napoleon Bonaparte. Taking Upfield's *Bony and the Black Virgin* as a point of departure for his exploration of the indigenous investigator's capacity to read Australian history for traces of crime, West goes on to investigate issues of ethnic detection in the best-selling 1987 autobiographical text *My Place* by the indigenous writer Sally Morgan. He argues that *My Place* records the protagonist's discovery of her Aboriginal identity. His paper reads Morgan's text as a detective narrative that has at its center the historical context of the white government's forced removal of thousands of "half-caste" children from their parents. According to West, *My Place*, using first-person oral narratives, gradually exposes this policy and explores its reverberations in a single family.

The papers collected in this volume reflect a growing tendency to explore a globalized and ethnically mixed world in literature and an expanding and fundamentally changing genre of detective fiction. Popular crime fiction provides entertainment for a wide reading audience and transmits cultural discourses. In the United States, for example, the market for the genre of ethnic detective fiction has boomed in the last two decades; this is evidenced by the growing body of publications in the field. Due to diverse historical situations, the production of ethnic detective fiction has proceeded differently in many countries—rapidly in some and slowly in others—depending on the given history of migration. Often cultural production, not

to speak of criticism, lags behind social and cultural development, as can be seen in the relatively rudimentary state of European criticism on ethnic crime fiction. Therefore, with this volume we intend to contribute to a more complex critical discourse on European ethnic detective fiction as well as to enlarge the critical focus on U.S. ethnic crime fiction by looking at the genre through (mostly) European eyes.

NOTES

We would like to express our particular thanks to Katja Beck and Kurt Fischer for their contribution to the cover design of this book.

1. See "Dieser Türke kann kaum Türkisch," *Salzburger Nachrichten*, 8 February 2001. www.salzburg.com/sn/01/02/08/tv-1373.html (24 August 2001).

2. See "Türke als Nichttürke," *epd Medien*, 21 February 2001. www.epd.de/medien/2001/14kritik.htm (24 August 2001).

3. See "Das Bild des Türken im Fernsehen," *Tagesspiegel*, 15 March 2001. www.tagesspiegel/archiv/2001/03/14/ak-me-2210874.html (23 August 2001).

4. According to an article in *Jungle World*, Erol Sander actually describes both himself and the character that he is playing as "more German than the Germans." See "Der ganz große Coup," *Jungle World*, 21 February 2001. www.nadir.org/nadir/periodika/jungleworld/2001/09/30b.htm (23 August 2001).

5. At the Orléans conference, the European association MELUS, Europe (Society for the Study of the Multi-Ethnic Literatures of the United States, Europe) moved to form its own independent association, MESEA (Society for Multi-Ethnic Studies: Europe and the Americas), based on an expanded theoretical and geographical concept.

6. Ray B. Browne seems to be the only critic to point out cultural inaccuracies in Hillerman's novels: "Native American experts agree that Hillerman sometimes misses the details of Indian culture. In his introduction to *Talking Mysteries*, Ernie Bulow . . . says . . . that he recognized that . . . the author . . . did not realize that there are not and probably never will be Navajo policemen like Leaphorn and Chee." Ray B. Browne, "The Ethnic Detective: Arthur Upfield, Tony Hillerman and Beyond," in *Mystery and Suspense Writers: The Literature of Crime, Detection, and Espionage*, edited by Robin W. Winks (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1998), 2:[1021]1029–46.

7. A variation of this strategy is used by Dale Furutani in presenting his detective Ken Tanaka's encounter with Japanese locals who identify him according to his Asian physical appearance but who discriminate against him because of his U.S. cultural background.

8. The novel has only been published in German translation from the English original.