

‘Something brand new on the skyline’: Renovating the City in Contemporary Australian Detective Fiction

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Almost every day there's something brand new on the skyline. The way this city is going, by the end of the eighties the place will be unrecognisable. (Shane Maloney, *Stiff*)

In late twentieth-century Australia, few fictional genres are more intimately engaged with contemporary urban space than detective fiction. The mobile figure of the detective traces the flows of capital and commodities within and beyond the city – flows which are driven by local desires for belongings and desires to belong to particular places in the city, as well as by national and transnational forces. These interests and investments continually transform urban space and identities. The transformations are often signs of the city's being ‘in touch’ with the world, with contemporary international patterns of work, leisure, consumption and urban design. But crime fiction can also tie urban transformation to a spatialised form of nostalgia, in which the history of the city seems to be lost in the processes of urban renovation but is residual in certain sites, often at or beyond the city's margins. The detective experiences the city as an object of fascination, but also with a sense of loss or estrangement, often with a desire for a defining moment or period in its past which is simultaneously a desire for social progress in the present.

The detective or private investigator has often been understood as participating in the fantasy of a perfectly ‘transparent’ space, as exposing and restoring social forces and relations. Franco Moretti considers the Sherlock Holmes stories in an essay titled ‘Clues’. Moretti's general thesis in *Signs Taken for Wonders* is that ‘literature's substantial function . . . is to secure consent. To make individuals feel ‘at ease’ in the world they happen to live in, to reconcile them . . . to its prevailing cultural norms’ (27). In order to read the Sherlock Holmes stories as ‘secur[ing] consent’, Moretti interprets ‘clues’ as puns or paradoxes which the detective resolves by realigning signifiers, one-to-one, with their signifieds, whereby social relations are apparently restored to their original and legitimate forms. This leads

Moretti to make particularly strong claims for what the detective actually accomplishes: '[e]very story reiterates Bentham's Panopticon ideal: the model prison that signals the metamorphosis of liberalism into total scrutability . . . the guilty party can never hide in the crowd' (143). In fact, though, 'metamorphosis' is at the *centre* of metropolitan anxieties in detective fiction, whereby 'scrutiny' only returns strangeness. A space which is perfectly transparent (all its contents can be itemised and labelled) is also perfectly porous (its contents are bought and sold; their packagings and labels only *enhance* their mobilities); every 'crowd' is itself a network of specialised markets, niches and trajectories into and out of the city.

In contrast to Holmes, or the other 'classic' amateur private eyes such as Dupin and Poirot, 'hard boiled' private eyes like Phillip Marlowe and Sam Spade, or their recent Australian manifestations Cliff Hardy and Claudia Valentine, are not privileged figures of independent means. They are small business owner-operators: they pay taxes, fill in forms, rent an office in the inner city, and require an operating licence to carry out their work. In this sense, they have an intimate familiarity with the commodity culture of their time – a culture which, in its complex array of tastes, desires, objects and values, is continually transforming. Clearly, a novel's protagonist alone cannot regulate all the city's struggles over space and capital, but neither are they entirely *lacking* in power. Rather, the private eye acquires new skills and affiliations in order to be at 'home' *and* on the move in the city. That is, the private eye is the subject perfectly adapted and adapting to a space which is continually being renovated, able to participate in and profit from those transformations; to be, like Cliff Hardy, most 'at home', yet simultaneously never quite settled into a renovated inner-city terrace.

The modes by which cultural forms and sites work to enlist individuals into social and private spaces as developing, self-adapting subjects are central to Tony Bennett's 1998 book *Culture: A Reformer's Science*. Bennett works against received notions of culture as 'functioning oppressively by stopping something happening' (12), whereby cultural forms are read as ideologies which 'secure social relations by inscribing social agents into an historically complacent acceptance of their given positions' (163). As a counter-argument, Bennett suggests that nineteenth century museums and evolutionary discourses functioned as 'cultural technologies' which shared the capacity to generate a feeling (in their visitors and readers) which Bennett characterises as a 'regulated restlessness': 'a worrisome insertion of the self into a developmental time which generated a requirement for progressive movement through time while simultaneously restraining that movement' (163). For Bennett, this 'regulated restlessness' *produces* certain forms of subjectivity and citizenship, those of 'auto-developing or self-progressing subjects' (152), not just in nineteenth century natural history museums but in cultural consumption generally.

Bennett's thesis prompts a reading of crime fiction not as expressing an ideology of social relations always being 'secured' or 'reconciled', but as a cultural technology which enlists subjects (readers) by locating them '*at a point of tension* within a dialectic between perfection and imperfection' (Bennett 153; my emphasis). Here, the turn of literary studies towards cultural studies works against much

academic criticism of crime fiction, which almost always sees this genre as relieving or resolving tension. For instance, Stephen Knight's 1997 book, *Continent of Mystery*, reads Australian crime fiction as ultimately reassuring because of the stability of origins, especially through the notion of being at – and always being able to return to – one's 'home':

In a Cliff Hardy story by Peter Corris, such as *The Empty Beach* (1983) or *The Greenwich Apartments* (1986), the hero drives around Sydney and its hinterland . . . with an engaged, appreciative interest. . . . Cliff Hardy feels at home. The city is a place to experience the continuities of a settled human history . . . (167)

In fact, the evidence of most of the Cliff Hardy books, from *The Dying Trade* in 1980 through to 1998's twenty-second instalment *The Black Prince*, is that Cliff is rarely 'at home': his travelling around Sydney is fraught with anxieties, and signs of 'the continuities of a settled human history' in the city are increasingly difficult to read. Cliff's actual home is both a site of his 'belonging' and of his *unsettlement*; its being 'renovated' is what makes it up-to-date and also what makes it perpetually unfinished, in-between homely and on-the-market. In *Matrimonial Causes* (1993), Cliff recalls returning home at the conclusion of his very first case, which happens to concern marital 'estrangements' amongst Sydney's social and political elite:

[t]he strangeness of it all struck me . . . here I was in my scarcely renovated terrace in Glebe, with money being made, and upward mobility getting going all around me, and I'd come within a hair's breadth of being buried in a Campbelltown paddock . . . I didn't belong here, but then again, with an architect wife and a small business to operate, I did. (187)

By 1997 in *The Reward*, Cliff dwells on the more extensive renovations of the inner city, though with much the same anxious positioning in-between progress and restraint, estrangement and belonging, which accompany his thoughts on the increasingly dilapidated (yet familiarly so) state of his own house. He has added a skylight, but 'there is a slight crack in the masonry from an old subsidence . . . It's pretty original' (75). That is, Cliff is always located by a tension between the 'original' and its value-added forms so typical of renovation as a spatial practice. This tension frequently turns into a nostalgia for lost sites in the city, sites where urban renovation has been too thorough and erased the visible signs of the city's history. For instance, around his Darlinghurst office, Cliff:

used to like the accretion of posters on the walls . . . The bill posters tended not to overlay them exactly, or they peeled off and you could trace history on the walls the way archaeologists read stratified deposits. Nowadays the council employs someone to strip them off. Sad. (41)

The feeling here is neither of social progress nor decay, though there is a clear sense of loss. But Cliff's mobility around the city generates exactly that sense characterised by Tony Bennett as a 'worrysome insertion of the self into a developmental time', in which one's present time is far from perfect or finished in its 'development'. That is, there is always more *work* to be done – especially, it seems, by private investigators.

Another investigator who often looks back to a more settled past as she negotiates the accelerating transformations of the present is Claudia Valentine. In Marek Day's four detective novels since *The Life and Crimes of Harry Lavender* (1988), Claudia's talents for improvisatory role-playing establish her as an altogether more adaptable and mobile agent than Cliff Hardy. These qualities are perhaps most on display in *The Last Tango of Dolores Delgado* (1992), in which a South American dancer (Dolores Delgado) is murdered in a Newtown nightclub and turns out really to be a transsexual from Earlwood. To locate the murderer, Claudia travels north, as Cliff Hardy often does, into the 'country' – in this case, to a site on the outskirts of Coffs Harbour called Paradise Park, which is being developed into an international tourist resort. The 'guilty party' – a corrupt councillor named Thripps – is found at home in suburban Coffs Harbour (rather than in Sydney, the space of the 'crowd', to recall Moretti). Claudia also identifies the murder 'weapon', which turns out not to be very exotic, though its origins (unlike Dolores's) really are South American: the poison is derived from cane toads, thriving in a bamboo thicket in Thripps's backyard.

Claudia also uncovers transnational (Japanese) investments in the resort, which provide Thripps with the possibility of 'onselling'. The capital which drives the development of Paradise Park, and the plot itself, actually exists in the *future*, it is the *promise* of capital (not yet 'here' or 'now') which value-adds Thripps's two-dollar company in order for it subsequently to make a profit. But Paradise Park is also 'home' to a rare species of orchids which live and flower underground, known of by only a few people. The orchids are 'secret' and 'rare', and for Claudia *these* qualities (which also remind her of Dolores) give them their value. That is, the orchids are 'value-added' objects, but in economies with conflicting ethical and fiscal systems of value: one of which is represented by transnational development, the other by an original, restricted mode of belonging, marked by scarcity and a secret.

For Claudia, who wants to align herself with this latter economy but really depends financially on the former, transnational interests in the 'local' produce tensions which she works (taking 'risks') to resolve. Dolores, however, had productively negotiated the space between these two economies, at least for a while, sleeping with the botanist who identified the orchids (in an environmental impact study) and also apparently with the Japanese investors. Knowing the 'secret' *and* being promiscuously enabled Dolores to increase her own 'value' to Thripps, blackmailing him by threatening to make 'public' her private knowledge of the underground orchids. In the botanist's absence (Claudia finds him in pieces in Thripps's backyard shed), the botanist's notebook then turns into the most valuable commodity of all, since it comprises evidence (potential 'publicity') *and* it is 'lost',

hidden in a TNT safe deposit box beneath the city. The notebook comes into Claudia's exclusive possession, along with ten thousand dollars in payout money which accompanies it. Finally, back in Sydney, Claudia's canny management of secrets (such as the personal connections Thripps's family would like to keep hidden) and public knowledge (the 'official' explanation of Dolores's death) enables her to hand in the notebook to the police but keep the money – a transaction which returns her a substantial profit in exchange for her 'risks'. Yet the fate of Paradise Park itself is never settled in any sense: it remains open to being bought and sold since Thripps has already poisoned the orchids. It is a space *like* the city, though outside the city's margins: it is caught in tensions between secrecy and openness, between 'original' attachments to place and the promiscuous contacts and transactions of modernity. Nor is Dolores's 'real' identity ever quite settled, even in death. The novel turns this, finally, to advantage, working up a sense of loss (of not knowing the person you thought you knew) in order to effect a narrative closure, when Claudia receives a visit from Dolores's mother. Here, the impossibility of ever properly returning to or recovering origins is turned into a kind of nostalgia, though one less to do with urban space than with personal and familial histories, abstracted out from their particular and material contexts within the city.

What seems particularly striking, in terms of the insertions of Day's texts within a tradition of *Australian* crime fiction, is that in the novel's network of contesting local and transnational interests, the category of the nation is the one thing that is *never* at stake. As boundaries in the city are renovated, 'national' identities and allegiances can come under pressure from or be superseded by international or regional affiliations. Ethnic identities might be managed under a (national) governmental policy of multiculturalism, but the management of Aboriginal politics within the postcolonial nation under global scrutiny might be much more slippery.

Shane Maloney's crime novels set in multicultural Melbourne – *Stiff* (1994), *The Brush Off* (1996) and *Nice Try* (1998) – are crucially concerned with the management of ethnic and racial differences. These differences are negotiated by Murray Whelan, a white middle-aged professional who works for the Victorian Labor party in the 1980s. Tensions between local and global interests are most evident in *Nice Try*, in which Whelan has to 'manage' an Aboriginal activist, Ambrose Buchanan, during Melbourne's bid for the 1996 Olympics. When three IOC delegates come to town the state's political minders seek tacit Aboriginal 'support' for the bid (hence the 'black vote' on the IOC) by keeping Buchanan out of sight. However, the attempt to keep black politics and identities 'in place' – Buchanan's regular place is the Stars Café, a 'linoleum-floored corner room with a self-service race and pine tables' in what Whelan jokingly calls the 'exclusively Aboriginal precinct' of Gertrude Street, Fitzroy – doesn't work. Buchanan knows the Senegalese delegate, Pascal Abdoulaye, from an international context, 'an anti-apartheid committee . . . in Brussels' (96), a venue in which blackness takes on a transnational politics of identity, and the 'committee' itself is a mode of managing

blackness by inviting it into the centre of (European) white territory. The global reach of 'blackness' turns out to have unsettling effects at the level of the state (the Olympic bid) but to be locally (if trivially) enabling. Abdoulaye obtains tickets for the official dinner in the Hyatt for Ambrose and his friend, Ernest 'Deadly' Anderson; the bid brings Aboriginals onto centre stage, with some predictably unruly effects. Murray is not quite at home at the official dinner, but he is able to negotiate its strange mix of local flavours and cosmopolitan bourgeois tastes with a good deal of pleasure. The menu, for instance, consists of Australian fauna, dislocated from the national coat of arms and repackaged for international consumption: 'emu for the ladies . . . loin of kangaroo for the men' (292). Although usually more comfortable with beer, Murray also appreciates the 'sauvignon blanc . . . a big herby nose and plenty of zest to the finish' and its appropriateness to the first course of 'Barramundi in a Macadamia Crust' (293). The Aboriginal guests conveniently complete the ensemble of national identities, all accommodated amicably enough by the 'Olympic bandwagon' as it comes to visit the Hyatt ballroom.

This festive, hyperbolic nationalism is punctured by 'Deadly' Anderson, though in hinting at a more familiar and 'authentic' Australian identity Maloney also places considerable weight on what the 'Aboriginal' might signify in this context. Confronted with the Barramundi, 'Deadly' exclaims: 'Fish? . . . Where's the chips?' (293) – which turns the Aboriginal man's out-of-placeness into a joke, while for Murray the experience, though less familiar than a regular serve of 'fish and chips', is more akin to 'entertainment'. Later, Deadly is the hero, grasping Glynis Nunn's aluminium javelin from its display case to spear the 'guilty party'. The humour in this instance again turns on Deadly's out-of-placeness, since his hostility is entirely misplaced; only Murray's privileged position of 'knowing' each of the players in this scene allows its tensions to be managed and settled down. Deadly's 'place' is one of excess, in which he compensates, though only temporarily, for some of the imperfections in the nation's past (such as the secrecy of a cabinet minister's adultery which threatens to become 'public' knowledge). It is a place, that is, which is entirely unrepeatable, provisional and unsettling.

The city remains a place of uneven relations of space and power even (and especially) as it is continually being renovated. Contemporary Australian crime fiction often gestures towards conciliation and settlement, but renovating the city is an unfinished business. The assumption is that all mobility is 'upwards', but the reality is that we need to keep moving to remain even in the same place. Back at home at the end of *The Washington Club* (1997), after a three-month spell in Berrima gaol and with his PEA licence temporarily revoked, Cliff Hardy spends some of his fee on repairs to the house: 'but then one thing led inevitably to another and then on to yet more scraping and restoring' (252). The novel ends with what Cliff really needs to do *next*:: buy another Falcon, and get back to the profitable if unsettling business of being on the move.

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