

Sof'town Sleuths: The Hard-Boiled Genre Goes to Jo'Burg

Tyler Scott Ball

In an attempt to develop new constellations of world literature, this article places the writers of South Africa's Drum generation within the orbit of the American hard-boiled genre. For a brief period in the 1950s, Drum was home to a team of gifted writers who cut their literary teeth in the fast-paced, hard-drinking, crime-riddled streets of Sophiatown, Johannesburg's last remaining black township. Their unique style was a blend of quick-witted Hollywood dialogue, a private detective's street sense, and the hard-boiled aesthetic of writers like Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler. Writing in English in the era of the Bantu Education Act (1953), Drum writers challenged attempts to retribalize the African natives with the counter discourse of an educated, urbanized, modern African. This article (dis)orients conventional treatments of both Drum writers and the hard-boiled tradition by tracing alternative lines of flight between seemingly disparate fields of study.

Keywords: South African literature, *Drum* (magazine), American literature, hard-boiled genre, world literature

It was New Year's Day 1957. The body of Henry Nxumalo lay lifeless and alone on the unpaved streets of the Western Native Township. Despite multiple stab wounds and obvious signs of a struggle, South African authorities were loath to investigate the murder of a journalist who brought international attention to the cruelties of the apartheid system. In just over five years, Nxumalo—known locally as Mr. Drum—had infiltrated Johannesburg's jails, shed light on abusive labor practices on farmsteads in Bethel and Rustenburg, and was investigating an illegal abortion ring when he was killed. The brutal irony of this unsolved mystery was not lost on Nxumalo's colleagues at *Drum*, a magazine known for its mixture of crime fiction, documentary photography, and exposé journalism. In the ensuing weeks, as the magazine's staff led a private investigation into the murder, the boundaries between fact and fiction, art and life became increasingly blurred. Tipped off by informants named Teaspoon and Pinocchio, the *Drum* team began to follow leads that indicated this might have been a crime of passion, or an assassination carried out by government spies, or even murder for hire paid for by the shadowy figure behind the abortion story, known only as Mr. Big. As the years rolled by and the leads dried up, the persistent question has

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remained: *Who killed Mr. Drum?* In his life, Nxumalo embodied of the hard-boiled ethos of the *Drum* generation, a spirit that would endure long after his death.

Nxumalo was joined on the *Drum* staff by Bloke Modisane, Arthur Maimane, Can Themba, Mbokotwane Manqupu, and Casey Motsisi.¹ This new breed of writer was raised on a regimen of English mission school curricula, American popular cultural influences, and the unique experiential knowledge gained from living in the famed township of Sophiatown. These were forward-thinking, hard-drinking, fast-talking urbanities, who some thought of as a different species all together, facetiously called *Drum* Africans.² Under the encouragement of their new editor, Anthony Sampson, this group of young writers transformed *Drum* from an out-of-touch relic whose white liberal roots were showing to the very “mirror of township life.”³ The fiction included in *Drum* changed dramatically during this period. Bernth Lindfors describes this transition: “Gone were the folktales, the stories about witch doctors and farm labourers, the stories about tribal Africans in pastoral settings. Replacing them were stories about city life, love stories, gangster stories, boxing stories, serialized detective thrillers, and true confessions.”⁴ Despite his reluctance, fiction editor Es'kia Mphahlele, recalls being instructed to include “wet sentimental stories and tough crime stories” in each new issue.⁵ Some of these included serialized detective fiction reminiscent of the American hard-boiled tradition popularized in pulp magazines such as *Black Mask*. It was during this period that staff writers Arthur Maimane and Mbokotwane Manqupu developed South Africa's first hard-boiled detectives. When combined with exposé journalism and tales of true crime in the city, this new literature gave *Drum* a distinctively hard-boiled aesthetic and with it a readership that continued to grow unabated for the better part of the next decade. Precisely how did the hard-boiled genre circulate so far beyond its initial milieu? What generic techniques did it offer its South African adherents? And how was it translated to suit the local particularities of this new context?

Living for the City

In Nadine Gordimer's *A World of Strangers*, mid-century Johannesburg is characterized as a city with “no genre of its own.”⁶ At the time, the ever-expanding metropolis was a place in which literary experimentation had become the norm rather than the exception. Johannesburg was fragmented by its own heterogeneity, and was

1 It should be stated from the outset that *Drum* was home to a constellation of writers too expansive in number and diverse in styles to be properly categorized as a single school. This list has, therefore, been carefully curated to include only those writers who are representative of the hard-boiled tradition, whether through their use of vernacular forms, generic tropes, or plot structures. The exclusion of writers such as Es'kia [Ezekiel] Mphahlele, who admittedly “never succumbed to the *Drum* style,” is merely a reflection of the aesthetic and stylistic variance of the group. Ursula Barnett, *Ezekiel Mphahlele* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1976), 34.

2 Anthony Sampson, *Drum: An African Adventure—and Afterwards* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1983), 48.

3 Mike Nicol, *A Good-Looking Corpse* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1991), 34.

4 Bernth Lindfors, *Early Black South African Writing in English* (Cape Town, South Africa: Africa World Press, 2011), 23.

5 Ezekiel [Es'kia] Mphahlele, *Down Second Avenue* (London: Faber and Faber, 1971), 188.

6 Nadine Gordimer, *A World of Strangers* (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1962), 80.

in the midst of the intense social upheaval brought about by the impact of rapid urbanization and the expansion of apartheid legislation. In this volatile environment, “African writing in English was characterized by unconventional genres and stylistic innovation.”⁷ For a few of the writers at *Drum*, hard-boiled fiction was the medium through which they chose to represent this world. As a subgenre of crime fiction, the hard-boiled story is characterized by a shift “from the pattern of mystery to that of heroic adventure.”⁸ Unlike the reticent classical detective, the hard-boiled detective is immersed in an already fallen urban landscape, where crime is both a plague on and product of a corrupt social order. Equipped with a sense of justice that often runs counter to the prescribed laws of the day, the hard-boiled hero walks a fine line between officially sanctioned and criminal behavior. As they navigate an underworld rife with temptation, intimidation, and the constant threat of death, hard-boiled detectives readily resort to violence to complete their mission. The hard-boiled genre enabled certain writers at *Drum* to reflect the corruption and violence of their world, becoming for them, as it was for their American counterparts, *the genre of the city*.

When the hard-boiled tradition first developed, in the 1920s and 1930s, it coincided with the rapid expansion of American cities, the introduction of prohibition laws, and the subsequent rise of organized crime. Far from being isolated to the American context, localized iterations of these phenomena were playing out in urban centers around the globe. In much of the early hard-boiled fiction, the modern metropolis came to signify the social upheaval of the era. The development of overcrowded urban spaces brings together an eclectic mix of cultures, facilitating the flow of ideas, commodities, and capital. Social and economic transactions create the potential for new assemblages of exchange, defined in the broadest sense. Works of crime fiction are acutely attuned to the global scale of social phenomena, routinely connecting individual criminality with the larger forces of capital and commercial circulation. Through the use of generic tropes, like the global crime syndicate, seemingly localized criminal acts of drug use, robbery, or prostitution are linked to vast networks of drug smugglers, black markets, and human traffickers. Despite the global alignment of crime fiction, scholarship in the field often remains anchored to national or regional moorings.⁹ The global circulation of popular fiction, which facilitated the spread of hard-boiled crime fiction beyond its initial milieu, cannot be separated from the circulation of people, goods, and capital brought about by modernization. Developing in an era of massive urban expansion and social transformation with equivalencies in metropolitan centers around the world, the hard-boiled genre translated fluently into the mid-century South African context.

7 Vicki Briault Manus, *Emerging Traditions: Towards a Postcolonial Stylistics of Black South African Fiction in English* (New York: Lexington Books, 2011), 73.

8 John Cawelti, *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance: Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), 142.

9 The recent publication of *Crime Fiction as World Literature* (2017) represents a significant achievement in the transnational study of crime fiction. And while these proponents of world literature have missed yet another opportunity to meaningfully engage with African literature in a manner that moves beyond the tokenistic inclusion of a few major works, this collection is a step in the right direction and should be praised for the complexity of its comparative approach. See Louise Nilsson, David Damrosch, and Theo D’haen, eds. *Crime Fiction as World Literature* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017).

As Lindy Stiebel observes, “The modern city with its possibilities of violence, glamour and corruption is the setting for the hard-boiled thriller and also the context for *Drum* writers and readers in the early days of apartheid.”¹⁰ The skills required to negotiate the lawless world of violent crime, pervasive corruption, fast cars, and dangerous women are easily transferable to Sophiatown in the 1950s. The hard-boiled genre provided these writers with “an existing toolkit of literary tropes, topoi, and conventions readily adaptable” to their own social context.¹¹ Integral to the selection and implementation of this toolkit is the cosmopolitan center of Sophiatown—a site Paul Gready defines as “a dazzling new cosmopolitan world, relatively free from state control where all classes mixed,” a space that “offered unprecedented possibilities for blacks to choose and invent their society from the novel distractions of urban life.”¹² In Sophiatown, people were exposed to new forms of expression and new ways of being in and relating to their world. Black South Africans lived alongside Asian, South Asian, and even a few European residents in a community that refused to adhere to racial segregation. Residents could access the latest in music at Ah Sing’s record store, eat curries with their hands at Rhugubar’s,¹³ or catch Hollywood movies at the Odin theater—“the largest in all of Africa.”¹⁴ Another important contact zone was Fanny Klennerman’s Vanguard Booksellers, a *leftish* bookstore connected to international publishers and distributors not only in London, Paris, and New York, but also in Moscow.¹⁵ These heterotopic spaces brought the residents of Sophiatown into contact with a multiplicity of forms, allowing them to connect to worlds far beyond the official borders of apartheid.

Across the Universe

If we consider the global orientation of Sophiatown in relation to our discussion of the *Drum* generation, we uncover a cosmopolitanism rooted in the African continent of the mid-twentieth century, one that is not the exclusive property of a globetrotting elite, but instead belongs to people living in slums under the control of an exceedingly repressive government. Despite their relative affluence and international fashion sense, *Drum* writers, with few exceptions, lived in stripped down housing units in which the floors were dirt, the roofs and doors were fashioned from scraps of corrugated metal, and to which no water, sewage, or electricity was connected.¹⁶ Theirs is not a cosmopolitanism of wealth and privilege, though it certainly had its consumerist tendencies. It is defined, instead, by an openhandedness toward wider worlds of cultural and literary formation. Like their *tsotsi* cousins, whose gang rivalries

10 Lindy Stiebel, “Black ‘Tecs’: Popular Thrillers by South African Black Writers,” *Reading in African Popular Fiction*, ed. Stephanie Newell (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2002), 188.

11 Pim Higginson, *The Noir Atlantic: Chester Himes and the Birth of the Francophone African Crime Novel* (Liverpool, England: Liverpool University Press, 2001), 54.

12 Paul Gready, “The Sophiatown Writers of the Fifties: The Unreal Reality of Their World,” *Readings in African Popular Fiction*, ed. Stephanie Newell (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2002), 144–45.

13 Can Themba, *The Will to Die* (London: Heinemann, 1972), 107.

14 Ulf Hannerz, *Transnational Connections: Cultures, People, Places* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 165.

15 Lindy Steibel and Liz Gunner, *Still Beating that Drum: Critical Perspectives on Lewis Nkosi* (New York: Rodopi, 2005), xxii.

16 Sylvester Stein, *Who Killed Mr. Drum?* (Western Cape, South Africa: Mayibuye, 1999), 80.

mimicked the Cold War politics of the era—with the *Americans* controlling Sophiatown, while the bordering townships were run by the *Russians*, *Koreans*, and *Berliners*—*Drum* writers developed an eclectic taste for styles and fashions from abroad. As Bloke Modisane describes in great detail:

The well-dressed man about Sophiatown was exclusively styled with . . . clothes sent for from New York or London, Shoes from America—Florsheims, Winthrops, Bostonians, Saxone and Manfield from London; BVD's, Van Heusen, Arrow shirts; suits from Simpsons, Hector Prowe, Robert Hall; Dobbs, Woodrow, Borsolino hats.¹⁷

In their choices for fashion, food, music, or literature, Sophiatown residents did not limit themselves exclusively to localized systems of cultural production, but instead seemed to actively seek out new styles and forms with which to express themselves.

Former *Drum* writer Lewis Nkosi describes the act of reading as “being international and local at the same time.”¹⁸ In an interview with Zoe Molver, he argues that writers are able to choose their own ancestors, citing William Faulkner as one of his:

Faulkner was writing about the South, and I came from another South, and so those two worlds seemed to coincide . . . he was so entangled in the relationships between black slaves and white citizens of the South of the United States. He was so suggestive in the ways of handling these situations and the language he developed to handle these situations that he became one of the greatest influences.¹⁹

For Nkosi, these ancestors help release a writer “into a wider world,” enabling them to “discover new communities, new alignments” and develop more complex identities.²⁰ In addition to Faulkner, *Drum* writers and editors cite Damon Runyon and Ernest Hemmingway as significant influences on house style.²¹ Not surprisingly, it was a similar list of writers that legendary *Black Mask* editor Joseph J. Shaw encouraged his staff to imitate when they first developed the hard-boiled style.²² What sets the writers at *Drum* apart, however, is that their influences were not restricted to a few American masters, but also included British hard-boiled and pulp writers, such as Lesley Charteris and Peter Cheyney.

In his autobiography, Modisane describes himself as a detective story addict who adopted the nickname “Bloke” after devouring Charteris’s *The Saint* series as a child.²³ The series was also regularly featured in popular hard-boiled magazines such as

17 Bloke Modisane, *Blame Me on History* (New York: Dutton, 1963), 50.

18 Zoe Molver, “Interview with Lewis Nkosi,” *Still Beating the Drum: Critical Perspectives on Lewis Nkosi*, eds. Lindy Stiebel and Liz Gunner (New York: Rodopi, 2005), 227.

19 *Ibid.*, 222.

20 *Ibid.*, 226.

21 Michael Chapman, *The “Drum” Decade: Stories from the 1950s* (Piertermaritzburg, South Africa: University of Natal Press, 1989), 217 ; Nicol, *A Good-Looking Corpse*, 219; Themba, *The Will to Die*, ix.

22 Richard Bradford, *Crime Fiction: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 27.

23 Modisane, *Blame Me on History*, 166.

Black Mask and *Detective Fiction Weekly*. For Modisane, “‘The Saint’ was a real living influence,” whose “carefree attitudes . . . served as a cushion against the pangs of a discriminating society.”²⁴ Peter Cheyney, whose work included a former FBI agent turned private eye named Lemmy Caution, was one of the most popular authors among African readers at the time.²⁵ His influence is noted by Mike Nicol, who describes Maimane’s style as “part Raymond Chandler, part Peter Cheyney.”²⁶ In Manqupu’s “Love Comes Deadly,” the tale begins with an intertextual homage to Cheyney, as the soon-to-be victim Barney lies on his bed “chuckling as he read Lemmy Caution” before hearing the ominous knock at his door.²⁷ In his autobiography, Modisane pays close attention to the effects that popular culture had on his early development, describing how certain texts could “transport [him] into an existence where white South Africa is another planet in another galaxy.”²⁸ In this particular schema, the act of reading generates an opportunity for black South Africans to imagine a world beyond apartheid—a world in which, at least in Modisane’s escapist scenario, it is the white settlers and not the indigenous communities that is exiled from South Africa.

One of the reasons why black South African writers were so deeply affected by popular culture is quite simply because it was available to them. Although “high-brow” cultural institutions such as the theater, opera, or ballet were forbidden to black South Africans, the cinemas, jazz joints, and bookstands were not. As Rob Nixon notes, “Apartheid bureaucrats did their best to limit black exposure to films that might be interpreted as subverting white authority.”²⁹ When one concerned citizen wrote to the Johannesburg *Star*, however, contending, “We are helping feed the fires of crime by our indifference to what is a canker in our society—the showing of crime films to the less educated class of our population,”³⁰ the manager of the Non-European Affairs Department, W. J. P. Carr, responded that it was common in these films for the authorities to triumph over the criminal elements.³¹ He expressed confidence that the movies should, therefore, be understood to have a good influence on the viewer, or as Nixon puts it: “Given Hollywood’s predilection for casting cops and upright men in heroic roles, crime movies could not possibly pose a threat to a society’s moral fibre.”³² As a result, representations of crime in popular culture were permitted where more overtly political material was not. Issues of accessibility are, however, only part of the story. Although apartheid-era restrictions can account for a certain proliferation of pop culture, *Drum* writers were by no means forced to adopt a similar aesthetic in their own writing; and, given their English mission school training in classical

24 Ibid.

25 Sampson, *Drum*, 27.

26 Nicol, *A Good-Looking Corpse*, 115.

27 Mbokotwane Manqupu, “Love Comes Deadly,” *Drum*, January 1955.

28 Modisane, *Blame Me on History*, 118.

29 Rob Nixon, *Homelands, Harlem, and Hollywood: South African Culture and the World Beyond* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 34.

30 Clive Glaser, “Anti-Social Bandits: Culture, Resistance and the Tsotsi Subculture on the Witwatersrand during the 1940s and 1950s” (presentation, *The African Studies Institute*, University of Witwatersrand, September 17, 1990), 17.

31 Nixon, *Homelands, Harlem, and Hollywood*, 34.

32 Ibid.

humanist texts and canonical British Literature, the decision to employ conventions of the hard-boiled genre seems rather consciously motivated. The influence of popular culture on writers from the *Drum* generation has a long critical history, which need not be repeated here. The particular role of hard-boiled fiction, however, has received only cursory mention to date. It is quite telling that the two writers at *Drum* most emblematic of the hard-boiled style, Arthur Maimane and Mbokotwane Manqupu, are also two of those least discussed by scholars.³³ The remainder of this article will attempt to bridge this gap through a detailed discussion of *Drum*'s exemplary hard-boiled figures.

The hard-boiled genre provided South African writers, and Arthur Maimane in particular, with techniques that enabled them to depict the volatile world in which they lived. Maimane "wrote slick stories about African detectives" who "wore big hats, drove big cars, and talked in a racy dialogue."³⁴ Writing under the pen-name Arthur Mogale, he created a long-running series of hard-boiled thrillers featuring a character one critic likened to "a black South African version of Dashiell Hammett's Continental Op."³⁵ His name is O. Chester Morena, otherwise known as "the Chief." He was an ex-criminal turned ex-cop turned private detective, who was "strong, daring and dapper, drove a big American car, constantly outwitted his adversaries, made love to most of the women who crossed his path, and always shot to kill."³⁶ The Chief is the quintessential hard-boiled detective, a paradoxical character who is intelligent without seeming erudite, confident though routinely overwhelmed, and cynical yet dedicated to the pursuit of justice. The hard-boiled tough guy is an alienated figure who emerged in the American context out of a set of contemporary anxieties that undermined the performance of mastery at the heart of the adult male psyche.³⁷ The particular makeup of these anxieties differs dramatically as we move from the mostly white, middle-class heroes of the American tradition to the black South African detectives found in *Drum*. Although alienation is a central concern in the autobiographies of *Drum* writers, it is an alienation deeply rooted in the subject position of a black male living in an anti-black social order. As Modisane describes, "I was alienated and rejected by a culture which at the same time imposed upon me an observance of its values."³⁸ Cut adrift from rural values that had little relevance in the urban centers of the mid-twentieth century, *Drum* Africans were further alienated by their subjugated positions within the apartheid regime. In *The Will to Die* (1972), Themba records feeling "a bitter sense of loss" derived from "belonging nowhere."³⁹ As a result of this twofold alienation, many of the writers at *Drum* invented characters that were as "urbane, ironic, morally tough

33 The exception to this rule is Matthew Christensen, "African Detective Fiction, Mysteries and Thrillers," *The Novel in Africa and the Caribbean since 1950*, ed. Simon Gikandi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 394–45. In this instance, however, the analysis is limited to just two paragraphs.

34 Sampson, *Drum*, 29.

35 Stibel, "Black 'Tecs,'" 188.

36 Lindfors, *Early Black South African Writing in English*, 29.

37 Megan E. Abbott, *The Street Was Mine: White Masculinity in Hardboiled and Film Noir* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 7: "[American] hardboiled novels embodied, assuaged, and galvanized an array of contemporary anxieties: Depression-era capitalism-defeated masculinity, anti-immigrant paranoia, and Cold War xenophobia."

38 Modisane, *Blame Me on History*, 178.

39 Themba, *The Will to Die*, 8.

and detached” as themselves.⁴⁰ Like Hammett, who based his Continental Operative on experiential knowledge gained while serving as a Pinkerton detective, Maimane purported to construct the Chief from stories he overheard listening to *tsotsis* brag in the *shebeens*.⁴¹ The Chief is, therefore, both a product of his local context and a man of the world, whose exaggerated swagger stretches from the soles of his designer shoes to the tip of his slick-talking tongue.

Something to Say

The Chief speaks in the terse street vernacular made famous by Dashiell Hammett. It was this unique idiom that Raymond Chandler singled out as Hammett's greatest achievement and the defining characteristic that separated the new hard-boiled genre from its crime fiction antecedents.⁴² In the first installment of “Crime for Sale,” the Chief tells a wisecracker named Fingers: “We are going for a little ride, me and you. And don't dare call me ‘bub.’ I could knock your teeth down your throat for that.”⁴³ As Lindfors suggests, “[o]nly a certain type of American film, American paperback, or American comic book could have inspired an African private eye to say [that] to an African criminal.”⁴⁴ In Manqupu's “Love Comes Deadly,” a hired goon named Chocolate informs Mr. Gray: “I'm levelling a torpedo at your spine, and if you do anything funny I'm liable to pump you so full of lead they'll need twenty guys to carry your coffin.”⁴⁵ Similar dialogue permeates the *Drum* archive and represents a distinguishing feature of its aesthetic and rhetorical landscape.⁴⁶ What helps make this language uniquely South African is the context in which it functions. For example, when Motsisi uses the name “Joe Louis” to describe homemade alcohol that packs a punch, he does so to reference the ongoing potato boycotts affecting local *shebeen* owners including his recurrent character Aunt Peggy.⁴⁷ Through a creative blend of American idiomatic expressions, British spelling and grammar conventions, and the rhythms and speech patterns of *tsotsitaal*, *Drum* writers produce a distinctly creolized form that stands in direct defiance to the regressive language policies of the apartheid regime. The composite language employed by these writers explodes reductive models of center-periphery. These writers rejected both Afrikaans, as “the instrument of their oppression and source of their humiliation,”⁴⁸ and the Standard British English they were forced to learn in mission schools. Furthermore, with the exception of Todd Matshikiza, *Drum* writers were detribalized urban dwellers who—as was the case with Themba, Motsisi, and Maimane—spoke no African language at all.⁴⁹ In the era of the

40 Lewis Nkosi, “The Fabulous Decade: The Fifties,” in *Home and Exile* (London: Longmans, 1965), 4.

41 Nicol, *A Good-Looking Corpse*, 115.

42 Raymond Chandler, *The Simple Art of Murder* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1950).

43 Arthur Mogale [Maimane], “Crime for Sale,” *Drum*, January 1953.

44 Lindfors, *Early Black South African Writing in English*, 29.

45 Manqupu, “Love Comes Deadly,” *Drum*, January 1955.

46 See Can Themba, “Some Women Do Think Fast,” *Drum*, March 1958; Bloke Modisane, “The Respectable Pickpocket,” *Drum*, January 1954; Casey Motsisi, “On the Beat: Kid Newspaper,” *Drum*, September 1959.

47 Motsisi, “On the Beat,” *Drum*, September 1959.

48 Lindfors, *Early Black South African Writing in English*, 21.

49 Chapman, *The “Drum” Decade*, 191; Nicol, *A Good Looking Corpse*, 37; Sampson, *Drum*, 29.

Bantu Education Act (1953), the use of a creolized English vernacular was more than mere stylistic innovation, but carried with it great political implications. As Stephanie Newall notes, “The *Drum* writers . . . selected English as their medium as a gesture of defiance against the language and educational policies of the Afrikaner state.”⁵⁰ From the constituent parts of a complex linguistic network, *Drum* writers crafted a vernacular language that “could carry the weight of the new African urban experience in a way that . . . ‘pure’ English could not.”⁵¹ This slick street vernacular is but one element of the hard-boiled tradition adopted by *Drum* writers.

One of a Kind

For Maimane, in particular, the hard-boiled detective became the surrogate for larger investigations into matters of race, ethics, and gender. The Chief is a complex figure, part criminal mastermind and part honest detective. His connections on the police force allow him to acquire a detective licence and the gun that goes with it. His power is enhanced further by his knowledge of the habits and techniques of the criminal underworld. As a racialized character, the Chief is able to infiltrate this world by posing as a fellow criminal, a feat that would be unmanageable for a white settler detective. The extent to which this indigeneity is a source of absolute power is called into question, however, as the Chief is detained while leaving the scene of a burglary he is investigating. When the Chief protests that he is not one of the criminals, the white officer claims, “You look like one of them to me!” to which the Chief retorts, “Oh, no, sir . . . I’m a private detective . . . here’s my papers!”⁵² In a parallel scene in the next series, the Chief weasels out of the grips of a crime boss named Moolah by convincing him that he does not look like a cop.⁵³ Frustrated, Moolah threatens, “[w]hatever you are, Chief, go and be it somewhere else.”⁵⁴ By straddling a variety of worlds, often playing one off against the other, the Chief occupies the often liminal position of a racialized detective.⁵⁵ The Chief’s particular brand of justice is not synonymous with the official laws of his world, and in fact, it is precisely at the moments when he seems beholden to the law of the land that he subverts them for his own benefit. In “Hot Diamonds,” the Chief first asks the police to tail a diamond smuggler and help him solve his case, before pocketing the diamonds while they are busy making arrests.⁵⁶ Here the moral ambiguity common to the hard-boiled genre produces a split between questions of justice and the practice of law, opening up a space for the critique of a legal system that was held in contempt by black South Africans. By refusing to align the laws of apartheid with the definition of justice provided by the text, Maimane allows his readers to question the rigid boundaries of their contemporary social order.

50 Stephanie Newall, *Readings in African Popular Fiction* (Oxford: James Currey, 2002), 2.

51 Paul Gready, “The Sophiatown Writers of the Fifties,” 147.

52 Maimane, “Crime for Sale,” *Drum*, February 1953.

53 Maimane, “Hot Diamonds,” *Drum*, June 1953.

54 Ibid.

55 See Margaret J. King, “Binocular Eyes: Cross-Cultural Detectives,” *The Armchair Detective* 13 (1980): 253–60; Stephen F. Soitos, *The Blues Detective: A Study in African American Detective Fiction* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1996).

56 Maimane, “Hot Diamonds,” *Drum*, July 1953.

In apartheid-era Johannesburg, these boundaries are produced and reinforced through structures of surveillance and control that often have very real implications for black South Africans. The Chief's ability to handle fast cars, as well as his expertise in video and audio surveillance, are essential elements of his success. In the "Crime for Sale" series, the Chief places an undersized camera in an oversized book to produce a hidden camera that records criminals in the act.⁵⁷ In the next issue, he adds "an ultra-red light" to enable him to record in the dark, an early example of infrared photography.⁵⁸ Later, the Chief engineers a Dictaphone from "a portable radio and other gadgets," using it to secretly record the confession of an overly confident drug smuggler. His role in capturing these crimes on tape inverts the power structures of South African society, placing control over surveillance in the hands of the racialized populace rather than the state. This is a trope common to postcolonial detective fiction, one which Ed Christian notes in his work:

The primary work of the post-colonial detective is surveillance, the surveillance of that which is suspect. Part of that surveillance . . . is the observation of both empire and the indigenous culture, the observation of disparities, of ironies, of hybridities, of contradictions.⁵⁹

Throughout the series the Chief uses these powers of surveillance to gain an advantage over his adversaries. While at first he blackmails petty criminals into rolling over on their bosses, he eventually uses the tapes for evidence in solving his case. The emphasis in many of these scenes is placed on the Chief's "ingenious brains," with detailed descriptions of how he "engineered an escape" or "played it scientifically."⁶⁰ This represents a noteworthy divergence from the American hard-boiled tradition and places this *Drum* detective closer to classical British sleuths, like Sherlock Holmes, in this regard. According to John Cawelti, "[t]he classical detective's role was to use his superior intellect and psychological insight to reveal the hidden guilt that the police were unable to discover."⁶¹ In one story, when the district police offer the Chief immunity in exchange for his assistance with an unsolved crime he brags, "Though the police don't love me, they need me. Cos I have brains."⁶² This inconsistency may be indicative of the demands placed on black South African writers, whose very existence defies the apartheid regime's relentless attempts to dehumanize and infantilize the black population.

When the Chief is unable to outwit his adversaries with his technological aptitude, he simply outruns them in one of his "souped-up cars." In a country where mobility was heavily restricted, the speed and ease with which the Chief travels is all the more significant. Although the narrative often centers on Johannesburg, the action also takes the Chief from Durban to Cape Town, and all over the Free State. He drives a Buick Roadmaster, a car whose very name suggests a freedom of mobility, and the

57 Maimane, "Crime for Sale," *Drum*, January 1953.

58 Maimane, "Crime for Sale," *Drum*, February 1953.

59 Ed Christian, *The Post-Colonial Detective* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 13.

60 Maimane, "Hot Diamonds," *Drum*, June 1953; Maimane, "Crime for Sale," *Drum*, January 1953.

61 Cawelti, *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance*, 143.

62 Maimane, "Hot Diamonds," *Drum*, April 1953.

subsequent powers of elusion that accompany it. In “Crime for Sale,” the Chief describes one of his many escapes: “I passed them so fast at one-thirty their eyes only got to focus on me when I was some blocks away—so they never got to see my car clearly.”⁶³ His testimony suggests that the Chief, who is both master of the road and the all-seeing eye of surveillance, has the ability to elude the watchful gaze of others, at least while he is behind the wheel of his favorite car. Although mobility has always been a significant feature in a genre that thrives on car chases and an unrelenting pace, it takes on a particularly political aspect when placed in the South African context of pass laws and the *Native Urban Areas Acts*. This power of mobility is not the exclusive property of the Chief, but is often extended to the criminal underworld through connections to global crime syndicates. In “Hot Diamonds,” an underground criminal group smuggles uncut diamonds through the ports in Durban to markets abroad. In “You Can’t Buy Me,” these same ports—and those in Cape Town—are used to smuggle drugs into and through the country. As petty crimes at the local level are connected to larger forces of globalization and transnational markets, so too does the action of the story take on a more universal element. The Chief is presented as a man of the world whose cool demeanor, technical expertise, and global acumen connect him with networks of exchange that extend well beyond his South African setting.

That Girl

Perhaps the most substantial manner in which the hard-boiled genre was adapted into the local South African context was through the use of gender. The representation of women as a threat to masculine mastery is one of the more lasting tropes of the hard-boiled genre, epitomized by the infamous femme fatale. Mary Ann Doane describes the femme fatale as “the figure of a certain discursive unease, a potential epistemological trauma” whose “most striking characteristic . . . is the fact that she never really is what she seems.”⁶⁴ Like the hybrid and elusive hard-boiled hero whose power is derived from his ability to transgress social boundaries and exploit the assumptions that undergird systems of knowledge, the femme fatale represents a similar prowess through her feminine mystique. In the unstable social landscape of the modern city, the femme fatale is the “articulation of fears surrounding the loss of stability of the [male] self.”⁶⁵ In Maimane’s Chief series, women represent the central problem of the texts. When the Chief first meets Diamond Lil, he is warned that he “shouldn’t touch her. She’s poison.”⁶⁶ More than a mere contagion, Diamond Lil becomes a lethal substance capable of killing simply through contact. The implication that the Chief would “touch her” were she not so dangerous rehearses the dominant power dynamics of the female lead as an object of our hero’s sexual desire; however, it is her commitment to fulfilling her own desires that represents the greatest threat to his masculinity.

63 Maimane, “Crime for Sale,” *Drum*, February 1953.

64 Mary Ann Doane, *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 1.

65 *Ibid.*, 2.

66 Maimane, “Hot Diamonds,” *Drum*, May 1953.

Throughout the series the Chief struggles to understand female characters, a fault that often leads him into peril. He seems incapable of interpreting the actions of these figures, admitting, "You never know with women."⁶⁷ In "Hot Diamonds" the narrative is driven by the search for the mysterious "White Dahlia," an underworld boss behind the uncut diamond ring. In the process of his investigation, the Chief repeatedly assumes that this powerful figure is a man, an error that enables the real White Dahlia, Diamond Lil, to escape capture. When he finally catches up with her, she plays to his weaknesses and convinces him to accept a bribe. The Chief underestimates his adversary once again, and she double-crosses him with counterfeit bills. Although she is eventually arrested trying to flee the country, the final resolution is unable to contain the subversive significance of her actions. The Chief is unwittingly overpowered, outwitted, and undone by his female adversary as a direct result of his adherence to patriarchal modes of thinking. Although his masculine ideal demands that he be impervious to guile and invulnerable to pain, his fragile masculinity is instead shown "to require constant maintenance and reconstitution."⁶⁸

The *Drum* archive is filled with double-crossing women who outwit their unsuspecting male counterparts. In Manqupu's "Love Comes Deadly," a lounge singer named Jacqueline hires gangsters to kill her boyfriend so she can pocket his gambling winnings.⁶⁹ Similarly, in one of Casey Motsisi's "On the Beat" stories, a woman scorned makes an anonymous call to the police to have Kid Newspaper arrested after he leaves her for another lover.⁷⁰ It must be noted that *Drum* has a long history of objectifying and demonizing women in nearly every issue, and the magazine's sexism is overt and undeniable. These particular narratives, however, attest both to the impossibility of the hard-boiled masculine ideal and the conscious resistance on the part of certain women to various forms of patriarchal oppression. For Julie Grossman, femmes fatales are "lawless agents of female desire, rebelling against the patriarchal relegation of women to the domestic sphere where they are deemed passive and valued only in relation to their maternal and wifely vocation."⁷¹ This domestic sphere is seemingly banished from the hard-boiled narratives in *Drum*, leaving both women and men free to explore their own desires for wealth and power outside of the confines of the traditional reproductive economy. Although these characters inhabit a world in which racial, sexual, and gendered norms are inescapably present, they simultaneously inhabit the parallel worlds of popular fiction and fantasy. This double refraction opens up the potential for imagining other ways of thinking and being in their own world, a gift that is further extended to the magazine's readership. Though much of their fiction is described as apolitical, the social implications of these works operate well under the surface of these seemingly innocuous texts.

Another key female figure who has received little attention to date is the Chief's secretary, Maureen (a.k.a. Lil' Mo). Maimane's version of the secretary, a stock character found in a number of pulp genres popular at the time, flies in the face of generic conventions. "The Secretary," in her American iterations, "represents an older

67 Maimane, "You Can't Buy Me," *Drum*, August 1953.

68 Abbott, *The Street Was Mine*, 7.

69 Manqupu, "Love Comes Deadly," *Drum*, January 1955.

70 Motsisi, "On the Beat," *Drum*, September 1959.

71 Julie Grossman, *Rethinking the Femme Fatale in Film Noir* (New York: Palgrave, 2009), 4.

image of middle-class femininity—chaste, domestic, and deferent to masculine authority.”⁷² Although Maureen works under the Chief’s employ, she is neither sexually available nor socially subordinate to him. She is, instead, a fellow licensed detective who is regularly consulted on the case, accompanies the Chief on sting operations, and also performs solo reconnaissance missions.⁷³ To be assured patriarchal structures of oppression are operative in both the American and South African contexts, however, only in the latter is the figure of the secretary presented as an independent subject beyond the control of masculine authority. Stephanie Newall reminds us that discussions of gender in popular fiction from the continent must “be moderated by the fact that women’s economic independence from men is considered to be normal in many parts of Africa.”⁷⁴ In one scene, the police are forced to let Maureen go when she flashes a private detective license of her own, an act that endows her with the same ability to thwart official channels of control possessed by the Chief. With Maureen, Maimane adds a character to the *Drum* archive who subverts the binary between good-time girls and mother-figures common in South African literature at the time.⁷⁵ He also extends the role of female characters found in the hard-boiled canon beyond the dichotomy of dangerous dames and distressed damsels.

Look Around

The hard-boiled genre provided *Drum* writers with a means of addressing social anxieties around race and class, as well as gender. Pearson and Singer suggest that “certain features of the hard-boiled detectives—their urbanity and modernity, their ability to cross racial and class lines as easily as they traverse the city, and the tendency of their investigations to broaden from individual criminal acts to implicate larger social ills—are easily adapted to the cultural critiques common to postcolonial literature.”⁷⁶ From the ethnic gangsters in Hammett’s *Red Harvest* (1929) to the Raymond Chandler’s depiction of South Central Los Angeles in *Farewell, My Lovely* (1940), or Charles Willeford’s masterpiece *Pick-Up* (1955), race has been a consistent feature in hard-boiled chronicles throughout their history. One of the first popular hard-boiled detectives, the aptly named Race Williams, made his debut in *Black Mask* by battling against the Ku Klux Klan. Depictions of race vary from text to text, or even scene to scene—at times authors represent racial transgressions as the conditions under which crime is produced, at others they become essential to fighting crime and resolving social order. As we saw with the Chief, race can conversely be an asset that enables racialized characters to gain the upper hand. This trope has roots as far back as Raoul Whitfield’s hard-boiled series featuring a Filipino detective named Jo Gar, published in *Black Mask* in the 1930s. In these tales the local detective’s “understanding of indigenous, hybridized, and colonial cultural norms and the ins and

72 Cawelti, *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance*, 160.

73 Maimane, “You Can’t Buy Me,” *Drum*, September–November 1953.

74 Newall, *Readings in African Popular Fiction*, 7.

75 See Dorothy Driver, “*Drum Magazine* (1951-9) & the Spatial Configuration of Gender,” *Readings in African Popular Fiction*, ed. Stephanie Newall (Oxford: James Currey, 2002), 156–59.

76 Nils Pearson and Marc Singer, *Detective Fiction in a Postcolonial and Transnational World* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2009), 5.

outs of life in Manilla are usually crucial to solving his cases.⁷⁷ The Chief's success in solving crimes is similarly rooted in his subject position. Rather than being defined by his race, however, the Chief routinely exploits racial scripts in order to trick his adversaries. In the final episode of the Chief saga, he harnesses the anonymity of the telephone and adopts "a business-like Afrikaans accent" to impersonate a white police officer and acquire the address of the safe house being used to smuggle drugs.⁷⁸ We should certainly question the extent to which the Chief is ever able to escape the saliency of his skin. As we saw with the police officer who mistook him for a criminal because he "look[s] like one," the limitations imposed by his race are never far afield. That being said, the Chief is able to manipulate the racial assumptions of his society to undermine and subvert their power.

Unlike the detective novels of the British golden age of Arthur Conan Doyle and E. C. Bentley, in which crime was understood as a temporary aberration in an otherwise stable society, the hard-boiled fiction that developed out of *Black Mask* "assumed that a stable social order did not exist" in the first place.⁷⁹ It is this characteristic of the genre, perhaps more than any other, which proved most useful for its South African practitioners. Behind the slick vernacular dialogue and thrilling car chases, these stories expose the moral and criminal corruption of the city, and by association the society upon which it is built. In *Postcolonial Postmortems*, Christine Matzke and Susanne Mühleisen argue that crime fiction provides postcolonial writers with the tools to "suggest that power and authority can be investigated through the magnifying glass of other knowledges."⁸⁰ They believe that crime fiction is important to the colonial context because "it is so well equipped to debate the relationships between crime domestic and crimes colonial and also . . . because it conveys those debates and those tensions, indeed those crimes, in morally and emotively legible personal terms."⁸¹ Whether overt or implicit, crime fiction—and by extension its hard-boiled subgenre—lends itself toward social critique on a grand scale, but it tends to do so in ways that operate under its action-packed surface.

One of the immediate implications of this analysis is the expository nuance it adds not only to scholarship on *Drum*, which often remains confined within the predetermined framework of an exclusively black Atlantic, but also to discussions of the field of hard-boiled literature. As some of the earliest examples of black writers depicting black hard-boiled detectives, these texts might fruitfully complicate contemporary discussions of the American hard-boiled tradition. If we were to consider the unique features of *Drum's* hard-boiled fiction in relation to Wai-Chi Dimock's expanded definition of American literature,⁸² we would discover a collection

77 Ed Christian, "Ethnic Post-Colonial Crime and Detection (Anglophone)," *A Companion to Crime Fiction*, eds. Charles Rzepka and Lee Horsley (West Sussex, England: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 291.

78 Maimane, "You Can't Buy Me," *Drum*, December 1953.

79 Herbert Ruhm, *The Hard-Boiled Detective: Stories from Black Mask Magazine (1920–1951)* (New York: Vintage, 1977), vii.

80 Christine Matzke and Susanne Mühleisen, *Postcolonial Postmortems: Crime Fiction from a Transcultural Perspective* (New York: Rodopi, 2006), 5.

81 *Ibid.*, 33.

82 Wai-Chi Dimock, *Through Other Continents: American Literature across Deep Time* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 3: "I have in mind a form of indebtedness: what we called "American" literature is quite often a shorthand, a simplified name for a much more complex tangle of relations. Rather than being a discrete entity, it is better seen as a crisscrossing set of pathways, open-ended and

of texts that expand the scope of the form well beyond its initial limits. Although much of the hard-boiled fiction written in the early American context “voyeuristically dwelled on the spaces of racial Otherness,”⁸³ *Drum* writers depict these spaces through the eyes of their racialized detectives. The preoccupation with speed and pacing in the American tradition is understood as a response to the closure of the western frontier⁸⁴; in the South African context, it refers instead to discontent with increased restrictions on physical mobility, as well as frustrations over the lack of social mobility for black South Africans. In regard to gender, both American and South African hard-boiled writers are reacting to the upsurge in women entering the workforce that took place in the first half of the twentieth-century; however, the localized particularities of these developments produce divergent modes of representation, as we saw with Maureen. The hard-boiled genre may have provided certain *Drum* writers with a ready-made structure, but it was by adapting this structure to the specifics of their locality that they in turn expanded the genre beyond its limitations.

Good-Looking Corpses

By the end of the decade, both Sophiatown and the *Drum* staff that called her home had come under increased attacks from the government. As Barnard observes, “[t]he township was a thorn in the flesh of the Nationalist government, not so much because of its putative slum conditions as because of the heterogeneous and creolized forms of urban life it fostered.”⁸⁵ When the day finally came for the enclave to be destroyed, it was absolutely devastating to the way of life that had inspired the stories in *Drum*. For then editor, Sylvester Stein, these forced removals amounted to nothing short of “cultural murder.”⁸⁶ Of all those who have tried their hand at eulogizing Sophiatown, it was her own son Bloke Modisane who said it best, describing the final days in the grim details of the hard-boiled tradition:

In the name of slum clearance they had brought the bulldozers and gored into her body, and for a brief moment, looking down Good Street, Sophiatown was like one of its own many victims; a man gored by the knives of Sophiatown, lying in the open gutters, a raisin in the smelling drains, dying of multiple stab wounds, gaping wells gushing forth blood; the look of shock and bewilderment, of horror and incredibility, on the face of the dying man.⁸⁷

Whether he knew it or not, Modisane was evoking in this moment of abject pain the very image of Mr. Drum himself—Henry Nxumalo. It is, perhaps, tragically fitting that

ever multiplying, weaving in and out of other geographies, other languages and cultures. There are input channels, kinship networks, routes of transit, and forms of attachment—connective tissues binding America to the rest of the world.”

83 Eric Avila, *Popular Culture in the Age of White Flight: Fear and Fantasy in Suburban Los Angeles* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004), 17.

84 Thomas Heise, *Urban Underworlds: A Geography of Twentieth-Century American Literature and Culture* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 35.

85 Rita Barnard, *Apartheid and Beyond: South African Writers and the Politics of Place* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 136.

86 Stein, *Who Killed Mr. Drum?*, 93.

87 Ibid.

an era defined by Willard Motely's maxim: "Live fast, die young, and have a good-looking corpse"⁸⁸ should come to such an abrupt and violent end. Within a decade the bodies that populated the *Drum* newsroom of the 1950s were spilled out into the streets: some were living in exile abroad, some had died often terrible deaths, whereas others withdrew into the sanctuary of the bottle. Despite the impermanence of their era, *Drum* writers and their archive continue to offer new readings that illuminate and complicate debates taking place more than a half century later. Their work demonstrates a proclivity for adapting cultural forms to fit their local context, a process that enabled them to reimagine their relationship to their world and reinvent the very genre in which they wrote.

88 Nixon, *Homelands, Harlem, and Hollywood*, 15.