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Searching for New States of Being: The Cultural Energies and Contested Spaces of Colin MacInnes's London

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Abstract: This article examines Colin MacInnes's (1914–76) 'London trilogy'—*City of Spades* (1957), *Absolute Beginners* (1959) and *Mr Love and Justice* (1960)—in terms of their representation of subcultures (gay, ethnic minority and teenage)—within the welfare capitalist society of postwar London. It initially considers MacInnes's attempts to contextualise the experience of these subcultural groups alongside new developments in urban planning and social organisation. I then go on to analyse the role of MacInnes's specific narrative approaches in tackling this problem, discussing the tension between his journalistic and romantic literary inclinations. The final section considers the presence of competing cultural energies within the London presented in these three novels and the sense of subterranean and historical forces at work. Finally, I conclude that the trilogy ultimately draws its strength from the combination of transition, liminality and vital energy which MacInnes's tapestry of characters and subcultures provides.

Keywords: Colin MacInnes, postwar Britain, London, place, postcolonialism, teenagers, queer fiction

Introduction

Colin MacInnes is, in several ways, a figure whose identity and existence embodies transience, liminality, marginality and transgression. Born in London in 1914, his early years were overshadowed by war; in 1917 his parents divorced, and his mother Angela (herself a prolific novelist) married an Australian, George Thirkell. The family moved to Australia in 1920, and MacInnes lived there for ten formative years before moving to Brussels at the age of sixteen. It was only in 1935 that MacInnes, then aged twenty-one, returned to London. As the title of Tony Gould's 1983 biography, *Inside Outsider*, indicates, MacInnes's work—as both a journalist and novelist—is characterised by a simultaneous determination to document hidden socio-cultural worlds and a sense of being apart from any particular group identity, be it hegemonic or subcultural. Gould's title comes from a comment of MacInnes's regarding his return from Australia: 'Born in London, but not reared there for so many vital years, my feeling for the city has perforce become that of an inside-outsider:

everything in London is familiar; yet everything in it seems to me as strange' (quoted in McLeod 2004: 40). The phrase also reflects MacInnes's particular occupational position: while his mother was herself a prolific novelist, making him a literary 'insider' in some sense, he ultimately rejected her values, subject-matter and style in developing what can be seen as an 'outsider' literature.

This identity and perceptual position can help us to understand MacInnes's distinctive relationship with the places and subcultures of 1950s London and the particular character of his attempts to document them. Those early experiences of the wartime city, coupled with ten years of childhood and adolescence in Australia—a country that stood in marked environmental, social and cultural contrast—underpinned his perspective upon the city of his birth. Moreover, he was gay in a period when homosexuality was still illegal and taboo, and this consciousness is reflected in his work's sympathy with minorities and marginalised groups of various kinds. In what follows, I argue that MacInnes's London fictions combine a sense of journalistic distance, assisted by his outsider consciousness, with a portrayal of the city that is by turns sentimental, romantic, dreamlike and unapologetically subjective. He thus embodies two seemingly contradictory facets of outsider consciousness: a certain immunity or resistance to the prejudices and assumptions of the culture he describes and a tendency to romanticise or idealise some elements of that culture. In MacInnes's case those elements tend to be subcultural and, in *Absolute Beginners*, consciously countercultural.

Subcultures and the Postwar State

In spite, or perhaps because of, his outsider's view of 1950s London, MacInnes's 'London trilogy' is seen as one of the definitive fictional documents of the capital in this transitional period. It is a time of volatility, instability and realignment in terms of class, generational grouping, gender, sexuality and ethnicity, and MacInnes's trilogy addresses all of these identities. 1957's *City of Spades* attempts to document the experiences of African and West Indian immigrants; 1959's *Absolute Beginners* focuses upon the emergent archetype of the teenager, but also explores ethnic minority and queer subcultures; while 1960's *Mr Love and Justice* presents a cosmopolitan underworld of pimps, prostitutes and corrupt vice squad police. Underlying all of this is what we now retrospectively recognise as the decline or fragmentation of what is sometimes called the 'postwar settlement', the period in which the Labour government of 1945–1951 established the National Health Service (NHS) and other institutions of the Welfare State and embarked upon a large-scale construction programme of modernist social housing. As Alan Sinfield (1989) notes, in this period

the promise of full employment, a health service, universal full-time secondary education, nearly universal pension rights and public responsibility for housing were established. These were the good things of life that, traditionally, the upper classes had secured for themselves. Now the state was proposing to make them available to everyone. All the people were to have a stake in society, an adequate share of its resources as of right. It was an alternative conception of the social order. (15)

Sinfield points out that what makes this conception unique, above all, is that this social order is secured by consent, rather than force. This is, therefore, a period of British history often seen as a 'golden age' by the left, as exemplified in Ken Loach's 2013 documentary *The Spirit of '45*, which presents itself as a celebration of a socialist current in British society that may—even in the current neoliberal climate—be summoned and revived. MacInnes's protagonists and narrators often espouse a sceptical or pessimistic attitude towards the British state, and from a leftist perspective we might see this as an articulation of dismay at the gradual shift away from the idealism of the immediate postwar period. Sinfield, again, notes that

by the late 1950s, it was apparent that the postwar world was characterized not by a new fairness and dignity for most people, but by an economic system which J.K. Galbraith likened to a squirrel wheel, as people chased endlessly round a self-defeating circle of production and consumption. (21)

However, any interpretation of MacInnes's texts as critiques of the growth of consumerist free-market capitalism is complicated by the novels' ambiguous attitudes towards the places and institutions of the Welfare State. For the marginalised groups and individuals who inhabit MacInnes's London, the postwar settlement often appears to be little more than a patronising and misguided intrusion, the passing of which need not be mourned since it was never particularly helpful in the first place.

This refusal to adhere to a single explanation for the problems facing late-1950s Britain reflects MacInnes's outsider identity. As his nameless teenage narrator explains in *Absolute Beginners*, with reference to the choice between Labour and the Conservatives, "Whoever [...] is working out my destinies, you can be quite sure it's not those parliamentary numbers" (24). Here, in 1958, the kind of disillusionment with Britain's two-party democracy that has since become widespread is already evident. While the narrator has a healthy scepticism towards the nascent industries of teenage marketing and consumerism—which he dismisses as "telly witch-doctors, and advertising pimps, and show business pop song pirates" who "sell us cutprice sequins when we think we're getting diamonds"—he tends to be equally dismissive of the institutions of consensus-based social democracy (83). The places of this new London, such as new modernist housing estates, are seen as alienating in their scale: the narrator feels like 'an ant upon a chessboard' among high-rise buildings, which 'towered all around like monsters' (45, 44). This endowment of the new Britain with a monstrous life contrasts with a fading dignity attributed to London's older districts: 'in Pimlico', we are told, 'the old, old city raised her bashed grey head again, like she was ashamed of her modern daughter down by the river' (45). The comparison with Pimlico, however, is telling; rather than choose one of London's unarguably genteel districts, MacInnes focuses upon one that betrays the grime (literal and figurative) which accumulates in lower middle-class suburbs. Despite the narrator's parents' insistence upon referring to the area as 'Belgravia South', in an attempt to escape the relatively deprived connotations of Pimlico, its unappealing qualities remain inescapable; as Jerry White (2010) notes, it was at the time 'seedy, shabby-genteel at best, outright slummy at worst'. Our narrator describes its streets as 'dark purple and vomit green, all set at angles like ham sandwiches'—a description which demonstrates the novel's idiosyncratic combination of the sneering and the surreal—and his disdain

for it undoubtedly reflects MacInnes's own loathing for the small-minded, secretive and petty qualities of English suburban life (45).

The other texts in the trilogy also reveal an ambivalent attitude towards the institutions of the postwar state. *Mr Love and Justice* focuses on an underworld of characters united by 'their total rejection alike of the left-ish Welfare State and the right-ish Property-owning democracy: a sort of Jacobean underground movement in the age of planned respectability from grave to cradle' (106). And in *City of Spades*, the efforts of the state to provide spaces for colonial migrants are scathingly dismissed: a hostel for new arrivals 'smelt high [...] with the odour of good intentions. The communal rooms were like those on ships—to be drifted in and out of, then abandoned. [...] And over the whole building there hung an aura of pared Welfare budgets, of tact restraining antipathies, and of a late attempt to right centuries of still unadmitted wrongs' (42). The ship metaphor is apposite in a trilogy which portrays London at this time as a city characterised by transience and instability; docklands are one of the key narrative zones in the novels, synecdoches of globalisation, cosmopolitanism and crime. This is exemplified in places like the Pakistani cafe at the beginning of *Mr Love and Justice* with its 'smell of stale spices' and 'broken fruit-machine' (8). For the novel's ex-sailor protagonist Frankie Love, 'the sea, certainly, came first—and far away so—if it would have him back. No woman and no fortune would hold him from that great and utterly dependable she' (42).

As a journalist, MacInnes saw himself as a dispassionate, objective and balanced recorder of events—consider the collection *England, Half English* (1961), which reveals his observational acuity towards both popular culture and subcultures—and the wry, cynical observations of the London trilogy reveal a narrative voice at pains not to be taken in by the rhetoric and ideology of welfare capitalism. This determination creates a narrative tone and attitude that can feel wilfully spiteful towards the institutions and practices of mainstream culture, on the one hand, and naive or romanticising towards subcultural groups on the other. His combination of a perceptive ability to debunk the myths that surround traditional English culture with a tendency to generate new myths regarding the era's emergent subcultures is exemplified, for example, in *City of Spades*' comparison of white, working-class pubs with those now frequented by Africans and West Indians. For Montgomery Pew (a socially liberal, awkward welfare officer in London's colonial department), despite the 'legend of the gaiety, the heart-warming homeliness' of English pubs, 'all a dispassionate eye can see in them is the grim spectacle of "regulars" at their belching back-slapping beside the counter or, as is more often, sitting morosely eyeing one another, in private silence, before their half-drained gassy pints' (48). In contrast, a pub full of black immigrants has 'a prodigious bubble and clatter of sound, and what is rare in purely English gatherings—a constant movement of person to person, and group to group, as though some great invisible spoon were perpetually stirring a hot human soup' (49). This kind of vitality and sociability is central to MacInnes's celebration of ethnic minority subcultures.

However, the ethical difficulties of any attempt to speak on behalf of marginalised groups, and the particular problems this raises for a narrative that aims (at least in certain respects) at a supposed journalistic objectivity, are evident throughout the novel. In this respect, it is advisable to read *City of Spades* alongside

key Caribbean migrant novels of the period such as Sam Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* (1956) and George Lamming's *The Emigrants* (1954). While *City of Spades'* dismissals of traditional white British institutions are witty but tinged with bitterness, the novel's portrayals of West Indian and African culture in London occasionally slide into a problematic exoticising and primitivising of these groups. Pew describes Africans as 'wild' at one point, arguing that 'they bring an element of joy and fantasy and violence into our cautious, ordered lives'; while the dance floor in the Moonbeam club is 'sticky, promiscuous and cloying—a hot grass hut in the centre of our town' (74, 77, 94). Most striking of all is Pew's sustained epiphanic monologue towards the novel's close, while watching black dancers in a theatre performance:

... they were clothed in what seemed the antique innocence and wisdom of humanity before the Fall—the ancient, simple splendour of the millennially distant days before thought began, and civilizations ... before the glories of conscious creation, and the horrors of conscious debasement, came into the world! In the theatre, they were *savages* again: but the savage is no barbarian—he is an entire man of a complete, forgotten world, intense and mindless for which we, with all our conquests, must feel a disturbing, deep nostalgia. These immensely adult children, who'd carried into a later age a precious vestige of our former life, could throw off all their twentieth-century garments, and all their ruthlessness and avarice and spleen, and radiate, on the stage, an atmosphere of goodness! of happiness! of love! And I thought I saw at last what was the mystery of the deep attraction to us of the Spades—the fact that they were still a mystery to themselves. (206)

Pew's association of white European culture with consciousness, mindfulness and disenchantment, which are unfavourably contrasted with a kind of unthinking instinctiveness and negative capability in black cultures—an innocent lack of knowledge, even of 'themselves'—recalls D. H. Lawrence in both its fevered insistence (particularly the use of exclamation marks), and its primitivist views on non-European civilisations. As Kate Houlden (2011) notes, Pew makes 'the lazy assumption that the jungle has come to town', and demonstrates 'a worrying tendency to essentialise, recycling long-standing myths of black musicality, physicality and unreliability'. However we feel about the ethics of passages like this being expressed by a generally sympathetic narrator, it is indisputable that they reveal an author concerned with more than simple journalistic objectivity (even if that were attainable). Instead, at such points MacInnes reveals a consciousness driven by a intensely powerful imagination and an undercurrent of hedonistic, volatile desire—characteristics which perhaps explain his acerbic attacks on mainstream culture as much as his celebration of subcultures.

Realism and Romanticism

In this light, MacInnes's efforts to provide a sense of objectivity in his narratives can be seen not as reflective of journalistic instincts, but rather as conscious attempts to check an imaginative and romantic consciousness. This provides one way of understanding the schematic and carefully-structured approaches to narrative he takes in the London trilogy, revealing different solutions to the

problem of balance (although, of course, MacInnes's explorations of different narrative approaches actually highlights the fact that no 'true', unbiased perspective or structure is available to the novelist). *City of Spades* uses a split first-person narrative, alternating between Pew and Johnny Fortune, a young Nigerian student of meteorology. These characters' alternating sections are occasionally punctuated by 'interludes', sometimes narrated in the third person. Here, then, MacInnes offers one possible solution to the problem of depicting the spaces of a huge city from differing perspectives. Although this kind of cinematic jump-cutting technique goes back at least as far as Joyce's *Ulysses*, it is worth noting MacInnes's use of such approaches, which are consistent with recent re-evaluations of the 1950s as a period of narrative experimentation (see for example Bentley 2007, Ferrebe 2012). *Mr Love and Justice* uses a similar approach, alternating between sections following the pimp Frankie Love and the vice-squad policeman Ted Justice. While the third person is used here, MacInnes often employs free indirect discourse to blur the line between the positions of narrator and protagonist.

These techniques are effective in creating a sense of cinematic tension and a kind of balance in the London of the novels, between black and white experience and between characters on both sides of the law. *Absolute Beginners* features a structural approach similarly indebted to MacInnes's journalistic mind-set, with its nameless narrator and division into four sections. These are simply titled 'In June', 'In July', 'In August' and 'In September', with each one covering a single day of the month in question, as the summer of 1958 progresses. Again, a modernist innovation—the daybook of *Ulysses* and *Mrs Dalloway*—is developed here, apparently in the interests of journalistic balance and objectivity. Where modernism rejected realist aspirations as illusory, MacInnes investigates the ways in which the movement's innovations can serve the more pragmatic literary aims of his time, to represent an increasingly cosmopolitan Britain. Nick Bentley explains that the novels represent 'a hybrid form in 1950s writing that can best be described as an "experimental realism"', driven by 'the journalistic and sociological impulse behind the writing' (2003). As MacInnes knows, however, there are limits to the extent that a successful novel can maintain a supposedly objective perspective, since this aim tends to thwart or ignore the reader's tendency to empathise with a protagonist; thus, it is in *Absolute Beginners*—the only novel to feature a single first-person narrator throughout—that he creates his most compelling character and narrative. With a tone that both echoes the defiant anti-authoritarianism of *The Catcher in the Rye*'s Holden Caulfield (1951), and anticipates the invented teen-speak of Alex in *A Clockwork Orange* (published three years later), this figure describes the atmosphere of 1950s London in strikingly original, and often comic, imagery and neologisms:

The air was sweet as a cool bath, the stars were peeping noisily beyond the neons, and the citizens of the Queendom, in their jeans and separates, were floating down the Shaftesbury Avenue canals, like gondolas. [...] In fact, the capital was a night-horse dream. And I thought, 'My lord, one thing is certain, and that's that they'll make musicals one day about the glamour-studded 1950s.' (MacInnes 1960a: 81–2)

The faintly surreal, dreamlike imagery here betrays a romantic sensibility underlying MacInnes's ostensibly realist, journalistic approach. The personification of stars, the

wry nod to London's gay subcultures in the dual meaning of 'Queendom', and the evocation of Venice, all work to give the city the qualities of a fable or fairy-tale. Moreover, as MacInnes's friend Francis Wyndham suggests, the narrator himself is a 'fantasy figure, really, not a real character at all'; and while he is often seen as an archetypal teenager, the novel's linguistic inventiveness demonstrates that MacInnes embraces the self-consciously creative possibilities of fiction in his creation, rather than striving for documentary realism (Vulliamy 2007).

We can also, in fact, see this kind of mind-set in the structuring, characterisation and narrative approach of the other novels. A nameless narrator may suggest some kind of aspiration to objectivity, but it also carries the semiotic simplicity of a children's morality tale. The same can be said of the alternate voicings of *Mr Love and Justice* and *City of Spades*, as well as the character names in those novels: in the latter, Johnny Fortune's surname is an ironic acknowledgement of his difficulties in a new country, and in the former, Frankie Love and Edward Justice's surnames denote their respective professions. Similarly, the simple structural divisions of the novels betray a desire to capture this sprawling, cosmopolitan world within the parameters of something that is self-consciously a *story*, rather than a piece of fictionalised reportage. MacInnes's narrative decisions in these texts are therefore more influenced by a romantic, lyrical and dramatic mind-set than they initially appear.

London's Cultural Energies

These qualities of the London trilogy are also evident in the novels' sense of mysterious chthonic energies at work beneath the veneer of everyday life. The different cultural and architectural currents that run through MacInnes's London include the Victorian (characterised by a sense of drab, stubborn rationality, at times oppressive, lurid and shadowy), the African/West Indian, as discussed above, the teenage (irreverent, blasé and streetwise) and the welfare-capitalist, manifested in the city's new, modernist buildings and institutions. Characters like Edward in *Mr Love and Justice* thrive on this sense of contested cultural energies swirling beneath the surface of things, being 'something of an anarchist: a lover of stress and strain and conflict, wherein he himself may operate behind that outward, visible order he admires' (MacInnes 1960b: 82–3). For Pew in *City of Spades*, this 'visible order' is always in danger of being reclaimed by a latent, pre-human history of place, as on a night-time cab ride: 'we drove home between rotting Georgian terraces, and the ominous green of the thick trees in Regent's park which, when night falls, are reclaimed from man by a jealous, antique Nature' (MacInnes 1964: 74). Here the sense of a 'rotting' city, like the decaying 'Napoli' district in which *Absolute Beginners'* narrator resides, combines with a sense of an ancient, active and hostile nonhuman presence, ready to overwhelm London's fragile built environment. This sense of fragility—of buildings, institutions, and of British culture itself—is common in novels of the wartime and immediate postwar periods: consider Elizabeth Bowen's *The Heat of the Day* (1948) and Rose Macaulay's *The World My Wilderness* (1950). It is perhaps intentional that Pew's musings on a 'jealous, antique Nature' occur alongside his 'wild Africans' comment, suggesting some connection between the city's new migrant

population and this sense of a latent, primeval force that threatens to engulf London's traditional buildings, institutions and cultures. In such ways, the different currents and energies MacInnes identifies within the city by turns entwine, separate and conflict.

The instinct for storytelling, then, is linked to MacInnes's sensitivity to the histories of place in London, his awareness of the city as a palimpsest, which may in turn be connected to his youth in Australia, a period that preserved the atmosphere of the World War One-era capital in his imagination. If his novels often appear pessimistic regarding the ideals of welfare capitalism, this does not only reflect a general cynicism towards the state; it is also a product of MacInnes's intuitive feeling for the city's past, how it lives on among sites of transience and progress. Fittingly, the hero of *Absolute Beginners* sees his W10 neighbourhood of Notting Dale as a district 'left behind by the Welfare era *and* the Property-owning whatsit, both of them' (47). The sense of the past is strong in this area between Kensal Green and Notting Hill, which the narrator calls 'Napoli': a name which, as White (2010) notes, 'marks it out as at once lawless in the context of metropolitan authority but living to its own rules'; it signifies transgression of state legality and the presence of an older moral code, as well as the sense of Italian romance alluded to in the reference to Venice's gondolas. In a tone that anticipates psychogeographical biographers of the city like Peter Ackroyd and Iain Sinclair, MacInnes's narrator revels in the murky histories suggested by the area's street names:

A whole festoon of what I think must really be the sinisterest highways in our city, well, just listen to their names: Blechynden, Silchester, Walmer, Testerton and Bramley—can't you just smell them, as you hurry to get through the cats-cradle of these blocks? In this part, the houses are old Victorian lower-middle tumble-down, built I dare say for grocers and bank clerks and horse-omnibus inspectors who've died and gone and their descendants evacuated to the outer suburbs, but these houses live on like shells. (1960a: 48)

This is one of the main areas of West Indian immigration in the 1950s, and the Notting Hill race riots of 1958 form the backdrop of *Absolute Beginners*' climax; the narrator is talking about the phenomenon of white middle-class residents leaving such areas. Yet his choice of evocative wartime language—the area has been 'evacuated', and the buildings are now mere 'shells'—is significant. In MacInnes's London, cosmopolitanism and social change are celebrated as opportunities to revive a decaying city, and the communities, subcultures and individuals that drive these processes are often found in districts still recovering from wartime bombing. The sense of liminality and transience that the novels explore partly evolves out of the interaction between these new communities and the histories of the war-damaged spaces they occupy, and this should go some way to explaining MacInnes's apparent ambivalence towards postwar redevelopment. The attitude of the narrator in *Mr Love and Justice* to a modernist housing project is typical: it is 'one of those countless anonymous 1950 blocks which, in spite of their proliferation, have as yet entirely failed to transform London from what it still after years of bombing essentially remains—a late-Victorian city. The block was tall and oblong-square, and bleak and thoroughly adequate' (83). These traces or energies of Victorian London persist, despite postwar efforts to remodel the city according to the values of welfare capitalism, and the distinctive character of MacInnes's London derives from the

different ways in which the city's diverse subcultures engage with that sense of the past.

The Victorian era thus forms the bedrock of this version of London, or at least one of the most prominent layers of the city's palimpsest. Yet it is not a period for which MacInnes's narrators express affection, so much as wariness or wry mockery. Victorian and Edwardian public toilets, for example, are described by the narrator of *Mr Love and Justice* as places of 'ludicrous solemnity':

For this simplest of acts, what one can only describe as temples, or shrines, have been erected [...] on an Egyptian scale. Each visitor is isolated from his neighbour, though so close to him and in such physical communion, as if in a sort of lay confessional. [...] All this seems to bear witness to a really sensational and alarming fear and hatred of the flesh, even in its most natural functions, that inspired the municipal Pharaohs who designed these places. (84)

This kind of Englishness is thus ridiculed, but it also holds a sinister sway over MacInnes's characters as they seek to reinvent themselves and their locale in the postwar era. The aura of pre-First World War London lingers on in this new world of postcolonial cosmopolitanism and welfare capitalism. White middle-class culture, for MacInnes, is epitomised in Kilburn, described in *Mr Love and Justice* as an area of 'straight-laced seediness', a 'primped-up exterior behind which lurks something dubious and occasionally horrifying [...] the peculiar English mixture of lunacy and violence' (82). While such descriptions of place are very far from nostalgic, they nonetheless evince a grudging recognition of some of the hegemonic forces that have shaped London's streets and buildings: forces which have not simply been swept away by a tide of postwar egalitarianism and social democracy.

In *City of Spades*, the influence of the new institutions of the Welfare State is dimly felt in comparison to this sense of older energies of place. Instead, the black subcultures of the novel are shaping a new London in a kind of dialogue with these currents, in places like the Moonbeam club. This is located in what Pew calls the 'entrails' of a 'bombed site alive with awnings, naked lights, and throngs of coloured men' (86). Upon entering and descending two floors, he wonders 'Can London be so deep?' (87). MacInnes's fascination with depth, and the sense of this being related to London's temporal palimpsest, the accessing of previously dormant energies that run through the city's literal and figurative underworld, anticipates one strand of later psychogeographical writings on the city. Iain Sinclair (2015) has recently discussed how the inexorable spread of the forces of capital throughout London is now evident even at this subterranean level: 'Underworld is the coming battleground', he notes, citing the development of the Crossrail project and the growth of 'the domestic mining fetish', luxury underground extensions (7). In MacInnes's London, these spaces are still contested: the hostility experienced by his ethnic minority characters in the city's visible, above-ground mainstream drives the growth of these subcultures. For Pew, this is 'a world where you've never set foot before, even though it's always existed under your nose' (85).

As MacInnes's metaphor of depth suggests, his characters are engaging not only with a diversity in terms of currently existing subcultures, but also in terms of temporality: an awareness of the layers of history that comprise London's

subterranean worlds. This is indicated again later in *City of Spades* when Johnny Fortune is on a boat trip on the Thames with his girlfriend Muriel, and the tour guide informs them that “beneath the boat and underneath the river bed [...] is the oldest of the numerous Thames tunnels, now disused, constructed between 1825 and 1843 by Sir Marc Isambard Brunel”; the boat proceeds ‘between Venetian facades of eyeless warehouses, dropping into ancient Roman mud’ (115, 116). This new temporal and geographical perspective has a Hardy-esque quality, focusing upon London’s Roman history; it makes Muriel see it as ‘a place quite unfamiliar’, just as it often seemed to the returning native MacInnes (116). As Houlden notes, Muriel’s words ‘indicate the confusion of native Londoners as they discover that the city of which they were so confidently in possession is perhaps not quite their own after all’. But MacInnes is also concerned with the more general impossibility of really knowing *any* city—demographic upheavals or not—given the layers of the past which inevitably accumulate, pervading the places of the present; and given the fragmentation of perspective and experience which is an intrinsic characteristic of *all* metropolitan life. In *Mr Love and Justice*, the City ‘still preserves its Roman quality of ending very abruptly at its ancient gates [...] so that gruesome Venetian financial palaces abut on to semi-slums’: again London’s spaces are haunted by their Roman past, and again Italian wealth and ostentatiousness is evoked in describing the capital’s disconcerting mixture of glamour and seediness (98).

Conclusion

To finish I want to emphasise the importance, in understanding MacInnes’s position upon the relationships between postwar London’s places, politics and subcultures, of his sense of himself as an outsider, a marginal observer of events, who cannot be identified with any particular social group. His novels do not dismiss the achievements of postwar social democracy or the Welfare State outright: the conclusion of *Mr Love and Justice*, for example, sees its two protagonists overcoming their socially-constructed alienation when they find themselves sharing an NHS hospital room. Edward seems genuinely amazed by the existence of such institutions; as he says, “these hospitals are really terrific. [...] they treat you whoever you are—no questions asked—not even any money. Just so long as you’re sick you’re welcome. [...] People should know what goes on inside these places” (202). Yet in these novels, the creation of such institutions cannot simply brush the past aside. Instead, they must evolve and develop in tandem with an understanding of London’s complex, vibrant mix of diverse subcultures, and with the history of the places they occupy.

The quintessential centre of this fictional universe is perhaps Stepney as it is described in *Mr Love and Justice*: it ‘has a macabre, poetic beauty’, ‘one of those areas of London that is thoroughly confused about itself, being in transition from various ancient states of being to new ones it is still busy searching for’ (98). That amorphous identity is microcosmically symbolised in Spitalfields market, ‘with its vigorous dawn life and odour of veg, fruit, and flowers—like blended essences of the citizens’ duties, delights, and fantasies’ (98). Moreover, because of ‘the markets, seamen, and Commonwealth minorities, in Stepney you can eat and drink, as well as other things, at any hour you choose to; and thanks to the alternation of the Jewish

sabbath with the Gentile, the shops and markets never close' (99). Ultimately, for MacInnes, this sense of complexity, transition and instability is a sign of a healthy cosmopolitanism that should be valued above all other aspects of the city. Central to this is Stepney's docklands location: not only because of the ocean's association with 'the castaways from Africa and the Caribbean', who perform here 'a perpetual, melancholy, wryly humorous ballet'; but also because at this point, the river is 'lined with wharves and cranes' and carries 'great ocean-loving steamers': 'no longer the pretty, grubby playground of the higher reaches but already, by now, the sea' (99). This thrilling sense of connection to the cultural energies of the world beyond Britain is part of Frankie Love's romanticisation of the sea: it "'teaches you the scale of things: what matters and what really doesn't'", as another pimp remarks in conversation with him (70). Here, as in the minority subcultures that MacInnes celebrates, there is a sense of transition, liminality and vital energy that is lacking in both London's tired Victorian past, and its bureaucratic postwar present. In these novels, which neither cling with reactionary instincts to the Britain that preceded Commonwealth migration, nor celebrate unreservedly the top-down institutions of the 'postwar consensus', the most vital and creative energies emerge from collisions of past and present, culture and subculture, the surface and the subterranean.

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