

## A Leisure Space, Revisited: Resolving the “Problem” of the Mixed-Race Child in *City of Spades*

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British postwar leisure spaces like the aptly named “Cosmopolitan” club in Colin MacInnes’ *City of Spades* served as sites for “immoral” behaviours such as drug use and racially transgressive encounters. These leisure spaces, removed from the banal realities of postwar life, offered a respite for their occupants. According to Mica Nava, the interracial relationships fostered there were signifiers of a racially progressive modernity, but the fictional perspective offered in *City of Spades* paints a much less glorifying picture. In MacInnes’ novel, many of the interracial relationships occur between white prostitutes and black men—especially African-American GIs with disposable incomes. The interracial unions taking root in spaces of leisure were often temporary transgressions for both the white British women and black (American, African, West Indian) men involved, as the context of the period between the two world wars provided a certain transitory feel.

In *City of Spades*, subcultural leisure spaces are re-inhabited by the permanent markers—the “unwanted human fruits of racial transgression” (Gilroy 123)—of many of these otherwise fleeting interracial couplings: mixed-race children. In the novel, Arthur and Barbara signify the marginal social existence of children of interracial couplings. Neither character fits neatly into distinct moulds of white Britishness or blackness. Arthur’s white mother, Mrs. Macpherson, recalls the difficulties of raising a mixed-race child: “Can you imagine what it was to rear a coloured child in London twenty years ago? Can you imagine what it’s like for an English girl to marry when she’s got . . . a bastard nigger child?” she asks (24). Mrs. Macpherson’s choice words underscore the critical role of social perception in (mis)shaping how mixed-race children born of white British women are raised. Mrs. Macpherson acts as a fictional counterpoint to the progressive cosmopolitanism offered in Nava’s approach, which privileges a more favourable reading of interracial relationships over the unfavourable societal response the fictional character highlights. Many of the white women in the “Cosmopolitan,” either implicitly or explicitly, acknowledge the difficulties of raising mixed-race children in a dominantly white society like Britain in their insistence that they would not be willing to give birth to a mixed-race child. For characters such as Arthur and Barbara, the dominant societal ideal of a white national

identity is employed on a micro scale within the family unit and shapes their relationships with parents, such as Mrs. Macpherson, and siblings who reject the non-ideal identity they represent. Barbara and Arthur lead precarious lives because of this disjunction between reality and the ideal and can find a semblance of belonging only in the very origin of their conception—the subcultural leisure space.

Through a critical reading of these two mixed-race characters, I will approach *City of Spades* as a work of “documentary fiction” (Dawson 97) in an effort to emphasize how interracial relationships in postwar Britain, although not illegal, are criminalized through the bodies they produce. With no available space to occupy comfortably in British society, interracially produced bodies, or “spectre[s] of race” (Eng 37), must exist in the (criminal) margins. This awkward relationship on display between mixed-race people and British national identity is a working through of the complexities of hybridity, which, as Homi Bhabha explains, represents the “ambivalent ‘turn’ of the discriminated subject into the terrifying, exorbitant object of paranoid classification” (113). Robert J.C. Young, adding to Bhabha’s analysis, traces the term “hybrid” from its biologically ill-drawn roots to the more contemporary usage of hybridity as a culturally indicative descriptor. He notes that debates about hybridity most often focused on sexuality and aptly surmises that “[t]heories of race were thus also covert theories of desire” (9). Young links elusive desires to the nation’s writing itself. He argues that the English novel has historically characterized the English experience as having a “painful sense of, or need for, otherness” (2), as if English identity is defined against what it is not. With its representation of a critical aspect of post-war British subculture, *City of Spades* complicates readings such as Nava’s that emphasize racial acceptance, progressive modernity and successful integration of mixed-race children into postwar British society.

As Frank Mort details, postwar London has been described as a city free of political unrest and violence like other European capitals during the period but, as he further suggests, this idea should not “blind us to the structures of sexual and social power that continued amidst all the excitement about urban innovation and renewal” (352). These structures largely dealt with matters of sexuality, particularly that of black immigrants and white British women. By the 1950s the number of black women immigrants was on the rise and, as Ashley Dawson notes, they were viewed as “potential reproducers of difference” (13), but my focus here is on the relationships of white women and black men, largely in response to the analysis initiated by Nava and MacInnes’ own characterization of the novel’s characters. Mort provides a detailed synopsis of politically designated “vice” and volatile events taking place in the city as a counterpoint to the ostensibly pristine image of London. The proliferation of one particular vice—interracial relationships—played a large role in the 1958 riots, in which Teddy Boy gangs saw fit to enforce “informal codes of social honour in local working-class communities by policing white women when they crossed the sexual boundaries of ‘the

colour line' via their relationships with Caribbean men" (Mort 135). This kind of vigilantism served an auxiliary role in the unofficial policing of white British women's bodies and the *de facto* criminalization of racial mixing.

To clarify my argument that the mixed-race children in the novel stand as irrefutable proof of white women and black men's sexual relationships and serve as bodies to be punished for interracial transgressions, I will outline my terms. I am defining "criminalization" as the process by which behaviours and individuals are transformed into crime and criminals ("Criminalize, v"). For mixed-race individuals, this transformation is indirect or shaded in terms of its ties to race and the behaviours that produced them. Notably, Britain never enacted explicit anti-miscegenation laws—likely for reasons of maintaining a progressive public appearance— but such racially transgressive behaviour was clearly marked as undesirable by way of the mixed-race child.<sup>1</sup> Kathleen Paul has demonstrated how, in the immediate postwar years, Britain's policymaking elite placed emphasis on maintaining a white national identity and judged each migrant group by its ability to be absorbed into or excluded from the national identity (228). Policymakers were aware of the necessity to approach these subjects carefully to avoid destroying Britain's reputation as a progressive and multicultural nation, but their careful handling of Britain's public image draws more attention to what it seeks to mask. Paul notes how "a specific bill applying only to subjects of colour was dismissed on the grounds of political difficulty and embarrassment" due to fears that it would not easily gain public support and that "discriminatory legislation would reveal the emptiness of the principle of a universal British nationality" (235). Therefore, blatantly declaring a white national identity as the only acceptable one for Britain was an impossible task; instead, people at odds with this ideal—as Johnny (the Nigerian narrator), Barbara and Arthur are in *City of Spades*—are treated as anomalies falling outside of the desired norm. In his analysis of the racial state, David Theo Goldberg maintains that "those falling outside of the assimilative categories—and the categories of legal similitude necessitate for their very recognizability the category of the outside, of outsiders—are cognizable only as strangers or criminals" (140).<sup>2</sup> British-born mixed-race children may not as easily fall under the category of "stranger" (as immigrants such as Johnny may) but, as I argue, "criminal" does apply, and this criminality stems from their embodiment of the undesired interracial relationships of their parents.

I find Goldberg's explanation of how the racial state sets limits on social possibilities through routinization particularly useful for understanding how Britain's desire to appear racially progressive kept interracial relationships from being illegal. He explains: "Rendering . . . practices normal by their routine repetition hints at their presumed naturalization; they are taken as given and therefore . . . coterminously unalterable" (116). For these reasons, Nava's assertion that "the appeal of racial others was part of a rational, contingent, antifascist, political stand"

(91) for the white British women who engaged in interracial relationships during the interwar period cannot be completely discounted. There is, perhaps, something noteworthy in these interracial encounters in light of their possibility to normalize interracial relationships, but I approach this conclusion with caution, as the political significance of such relationships may have been nonexistent or, at the very least, non-universal for those involved. In *City of Spades*, the varied responses and motivations of the white British female characters render questionable the act of assuming a certain political meaning for such relationships. For example, Muriel is willing to have Johnny's baby while Dorothy would rather eliminate her reproductive capabilities than birth a mixed-race child. Nava's analysis of interracial relationships begs comparison with Sara Ahmed's notion of "stranger fetishism." Ahmed describes stranger fetishism as "a fetishism of figures: *it invests the figure of the stranger with a life of its own insofar as it cuts 'the stranger' off from the histories of its determination*" (5, original emphasis). It is precisely this disconnection that problematizes Nava's assertion. In her analysis, she cuts off the African-American GIs from their histories to argue that "blacks were seen as primarily American and therefore *modern*" in contrast to the perceptions and practices in America "where the everyday experience of race was inseparable from its national history of slavery" (88, original emphasis). Even though U.S. servicemen were abroad and therefore removed from the explicitly racist Jim Crow South, I find characterizing interracial relationships in Britain during the interwar period as signifiers of an inherently progressive modernity inaccurate and near-sighted. Ahmed outlines instead what is at stake in "strange encounters" between bodies with their own histories:

The face-to-face encounter is mediated precisely by that which allows the face to appear in the present. The face-to-face is hence not simply about two persons facing each other—the face to face [sic] cannot be thought of as a coupling. This encounter is mediated; it presupposes other faces, other encounters of facing, other bodies, other spaces, and other times. (7)

Despite attempts to remove the African-American GIs from a racially uncomfortable—if not volatile—American history, it is neither possible nor forthright to liberally inscribe interracial relationships with intrinsically progressive significance. This is even more so considering the fact that black American servicewomen and white American servicemen were also deployed in Britain at the time; but neither of these groups garnered the amount of attention paid to the black servicemen in terms of representing modernity or "Hollywood glamour." In fact, the postwar period may constitute a particularly clear and important example of how and why this signification of a post-racial modernity is untenable in light of a more comprehensive assessment of the circumstances from which such signification arose.

## Maintaining (Separate) Spaces

Goldberg claims that the state “goes a long way in making bodies what they are, and by extension who they are” (115). By encouraging certain social practices and prohibiting others, Britain made clear how its ideal national identity should look. The colour bar, which banned black immigrants from occupying certain spaces and thus limited cross-racial contact, facilitated the emergence of alternative recreational spaces where they could drink, dance, listen to music, and relax (Gilroy 127). As Paul Gilroy notes, African-American servicemen and their British friends “formed a hidden public world where cross-racial contact was an unexceptional part of life, and where ordinary working people were often welcoming and appreciative” (59). These hidden leisure spaces continued into the postwar period and serve as a large part of the setting for MacInnes’ *City of Spades*. Mary Louise Pratt theorizes leisure spaces as “contact zones” or “social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination—such as colonialism and slavery, or their *aftermaths* as they are lived out across the globe today” (Pratt 7, my emphasis).<sup>3</sup> Within Pratt’s theory, contact zones can range from the public spaces of transportation, schools, and shopping centers to pubs and nightclubs. Along similar lines, Avtar Brah’s concept of “diaspora space,” which conceptually connects diaspora, borders and dis/location as “a confluence of economic, political, cultural, and psychic processes” (205), supplements Pratt’s analysis in significant ways that take into account the various intersecting factors that emerge when bodies meet. Brah suggests that diaspora space is “where multiple subject positions are juxtaposed, contested, proclaimed or disavowed; where the permitted and the prohibited perpetually interrogate; and where the accepted and the transgressive imperceptibly mingle even while these syncretic forms may be disclaimed in the name of purity and tradition” (205). Drawing from Pratt’s concept of contact zones and Brah’s analysis of diaspora space, I seek to connect the leisure space of the interwar period analyzed by Nava to the postwar subcultural leisure spaces in *City of Spades* as a means of demonstrating a fluidity between the generations of its inhabitants.

Nava argues that in this interwar context,

women’s fascination with cultural difference and their sexual interest in racial others was not only connected to fantasies of abroad and the constraints of Englishness, it was also often a self-reflexive act of defiance in a social climate in which the repudiation of racial others was increasingly widespread. (90)

Throughout the chapter entitled “White Women and Black Men” she asserts that the white women’s attraction to African-American servicemen was based on their “Americanness” and their representation of Hollywood glamour. In other words, the women used their pop culture encounters with America through film and music as a basis for their interest in these

men. Yet, with the exception of Paul Robeson (mentioned by Nava as a “signifier” of Americanness), Hollywood was overwhelmingly white—hence Montgomery Pew’s observation of the photographs lining the entrance to the “Moonbeam” showing “American Negro singers and white starlets” (MacInnes 75). As Ahmed explains, “[c]onsumer culture is one site in which becoming other is offered to Western subjects through the commodity form (‘stranger fetishism’)” (125). White British women’s infatuation with Hollywood film and American music fueled their attraction to the African-American servicemen, however fantastic such a linking proved to be. These women, according to Nava’s account, did not show the same interest in the white American servicemen, yet she continues to stress that “[e]pidermal difference did not signify in Britain as profoundly as did class and accent” (93). According to Nava,

Different histories produce different outcomes, and ‘the negro’ in Britain during the interwar period, although still discriminated against in multiple ways, was nevertheless associated increasingly with the modern and with the Hollywood landscape of the new world, rather than with narratives of empire or America’s internal memories of slavery. (93)

This reading of the interwar period may stand (although problematically) because of the temporary nature of the black men’s presence. The stationing of black servicemen in between world wars was not assumed to permanently change the British landscape as the men would, presumably, return to their distant homes but, as a result of their warm reception, some 750 children were born out of these cosmopolitan minglings (“GREAT BRITAIN”).

Hence, the subject matter of *City of Spades* is keying into an issue that has long been a part of British culture. The presence of mixed-race people in Britain historically precedes the postwar period as early as the sixteenth century, but fears and assumptions about racial mixing persisted well into the twentieth century (Tizard and Phoenix 6). Racist discourse invoked theories of race that posited the notion that people were separated into distinct biological groupings based on skin colour—white being supreme and black being the lowest—as a reason for maintaining racial separations and hierarchies. Theories of race pervaded nearly all areas of social life and served as an excuse for the poor and often dehumanizing treatment of black people at the hands of whites (Tizard and Phoenix 1). However, the very existence of mixed-race people upended so-called biological notions of race, as the “scientific” basis for racial separatism was proven unfounded. As Goldberg explains:

Mixed-race presence offered an obvious challenge to polygenic presumption. If, as polygenesis presumed, races are species, and species are defined by capacity to reproduce only among species members, the existence of mixed-race (or cross-species) offspring suggests failure to meet a crucial condition of the theory. (25)

The lack of biological reason for opposition to racial mixing called forth the need for a different argument for racial discrimination and its role in

the formation of a national identity. One of the greatest risks of interracial relationships is the creation of the unreadable body. Basing racial categorizations on skin colour becomes a somewhat difficult task when considering the mixed-race body. In her discussion of racial passing, Ahmed contends that

The economy of desire 'to tell the difference' is itself an apparatus of knowledge which already fixes others into a certain place. Such an economy of desire to tell the difference assumes that the difference can be found somewhere on (or in) the bodies of strangers (on or underneath their skin). Strange bodies that do not fit existing criteria for identification keep in place, or are even the condition of possibility for, the desire to tell bodies apart from each other through the accumulation of knowledge. (126)

As evident in the treatment of Arthur and Barbara, "strange bodies" produced out of interracial couplings present a unique problem for the nation seeking a homogeneously representative identity. By evading distinct categorization, mixed-race people confound preconceived notions of how race functions within the body politic and suffer social slights because of it. As Gilroy states, "[o]lder anxieties about miscegenation and racial degeneration were reborn in the form of widespread concern for the tragic plight of the 'half-caste' children whose wretched and indeterminate existence proved the folly of interracial contact beyond all doubt" (123). I will return to presumptions about the "tragic mulatto" later in the essay.

### Leisure Spaces as Contact Zones in *City of Spades*

Johnny Fortune, the Nigerian narrator of *City of Spades*, characterizes the "Cosmopolitan" dance hall as "the nearest proximity [he has] seen yet in London to the gaiety and happiness back home" (49). Upon first sight of the club's interior, Johnny exclaims, "Everywhere us, with silly little white girls, hopping and skipping fit to die! Africans, West Indians, and coloured G.I.s all boxed up together with the cream of this London female rubbish!" (49). What is most striking to him is the cosmopolitan nature of the club's patrons. Johnny's point of view is supplemented by that of Montgomery Pew's in his description of his first foray into the subcultural leisure space. Pew, upon first venturing into the "Moonbeam," notes its daytime invisibility: "Never had I thought that the bombed site across the way contained, by night, in its entrails, the Moonbeam club. The whole street was transformed . . . the bombed site alive with awnings, naked lights, and throngs of coloured men" (MacInnes 74). Both narrators, based on their distinctly located perspectives, shed light on the uncanny style and substance of leisure spaces, with Johnny focusing on the unfamiliar mix of people and Pew on the once familiar landscape.

Pew, a white man, finds himself intrigued by this London underworld and progressively becomes more immersed in it as the novel continues. Michael Banton, one of the foremost sociologists of the period, writes:

“Whites who wish to cast off their inhibitions will often seek out coloured people for company... they are not worried lest the stranger should be unaware of the conventions governing the relationship when it is from convention itself that they seek to escape” (127). This narrative is critically redeployed by MacInnes in his characterization of white Londoners such as Pew and Theodora as thrill-seekers drawn to black people and their leisure spaces by curiosity, although the aforementioned are interrogated about their attraction to black people by the pseudo-intellectual voice of Mr. Karl Marx Bo (66, 80).

In one of the few sustained pieces of criticism on MacInnes, Nick Bentley describes MacInnes’ narrative style as one that “announces itself as distinct from standard English and thereby operates as a statement or proclamation of rejection and critique of dominant cultural values” (76). While I would not suggest the narrative style of *City of Spades* in itself constitutes a critique of dominant discourse, MacInnes’ narrative recasts white racist discourse in a manner that brings forth its fallacies. His use of surreal interludes such as the courtroom scene and heavily signified character naming (e.g. Detective Purity, Mr. Karl Marx Bo) call into question prevailing modes of racist thought by verging on absurdity. Dorothy, one of the so-called “trading” women (64) and half sister of Arthur, spews some of the most bigoted commentary in the novel. In a conversation with Johnny about Arthur, she says: “I don’t have anything to do with him. I don’t like these half white, half Africans.” When Johnny implies that she may end up having a mixed child given her lifestyle, she retorts: “Are you kidding? I’d get rid of it . . . I’m going to have my ovaries removed” (53). Dorothy demonstrates an unmistakable conviction to upholding certain social impossibilities for interracial couplings coming out of the leisure space. While some women may have been “voluntary companions full of hope” (64), others—like Dorothy—have drawn reproductive boundaries around these shortlived relationships. Dorothy’s assertion that she will have her ovaries removed before birthing a mixed-race baby reflects what Sarah Brophy describes as a self-severing act of “butchery” or “an objective corollary for the violent, implosive contradictions of white female cosmopolitanism” (124). Dorothy’s lifestyle is in direct odds with her conservative outlook on racial mixing. Her way of resolving this contradiction, and avoiding the mistake her mother, Mrs. Macpherson, made years ago, is to altogether eliminate her reproductive ability.

Dorothy’s affirmation, as extreme as it may sound, hints at a more responsible approach to reconciling the risks of a white female cosmopolitan lifestyle than the one taken by her mother. Mrs. Macpherson’s negative attitude for raising her “bastard nigger child” profoundly shaped Arthur’s life. A sociological survey of studies done in 1940s Britain suggests “that mixed-parentage people at that time suffered not only from the same double stigma as people with two black parents—that of colour and low social class—but also from the additional stigma of having a mother who was considered depraved” (Tizard and Phoenix 22).



In his writing about relations between white women and “coloured” men, Banton characterizes the women as “outcasts from white society” with either a “background of deprivation” or as “psychologically abnormal and unable to live up to the conventions demanded by respectable public opinion” and living a “self-destructive existence” (127), a characterization Johnny echoes by calling them “London female rubbish.” Banton clearly views the reproductivity of white British women who engage in interracial relationships as one that falls well outside of the scope of respectability. He continues to write that in light of the emphasis in English culture upon “breeding true” and maintaining the nation’s cultural identity, “it is perfectly natural for people who have been brought up in these ideas to object to something which will produce what they regard as ‘mongrels’—offspring who do not conform to the preferred cultural pattern” (136-137). Although Dorothy is not a model citizen in many ways, she has clearly taken up the responsibility of “breeding true” by electing to not breed at all.

Dawson writes that by “enacting fresh ways of being British, members of the postcolonial diaspora helped to reconfigure social categories such as race, gender, and sexuality that cemented conventional definitions of national identity” (7). *City of Spades* displays this reconfiguration through the lives of Barbara and Arthur. Although these two characters share a similar background of being raised by white British mothers without knowledge of or intervention from their black fathers, gender plays a role in how their places in British society are delineated. MacInnes also aligns Dorothy with Barbara and Arthur with Alfie Bongo, the white queer boy (167). Such alignments gesture towards a solidarity based on exclusion from the rigid categorization and gendered expectations of British society. Both pairs of women and men fall outside of the conventional (reproductive) norms for their gender as the women engage in prostitution and the men are unwilling or incapable of performing an ideal masculinity. This dilemma of identity complicates the nation’s ability to control or punish its citizens outright. Detective Purity verbalizes the quandary:

‘See you’re here, Alfie . . . One day we’ll have to find a little charge for you. Any suggestions, lad? I’ve got one or two ideas. And you,’ he said to Arthur. ‘You getting tired of life outside the nick? Maybe we could help you back inside again. Dice, eh? That’s gambling. Hullo, Barbara. Aren’t you in need of some care and protection?’ (MacInnes 168)

The inspector, clearly invested in maintaining national purity and tidy distinctions, desires to rectify the offenses of these imperfect citizens through the only legal channels available. He demonstrates an awareness of the “crimes” of the young people and is eager to see them punished. The Sexual Offences Act of 1956 details a number of prostitution-related offences for which Barbara could have been tried; male homosexual acts were not decriminalized until the 1967 Sexual Offences Act.<sup>4</sup> Here, MacInnes could have been writing from experience as he was openly gay

when homosexuality was still illegal and, according to his sister-in-law, was always on the run and living in fear (Vulliamy).

It is not only Detective Purity who wilfully marginalizes Arthur and the others, however. Despite Arthur's initial desire to forge a connection of sorts with Johnny, his half-brother, Johnny dismisses Arthur in a number of encounters. After the dispersal of a party at the hands of Detective Purity, Johnny refuses to allow Arthur and Alf Bongo to ride in the car with him and he notes that the two of them "walked away chattering in spite together" (169). For Arthur, this act is another denial of access to his father's material assets as well as his familial bond. Johnny represents the life and father-son relationship Arthur has always desired but never been given and thus Johnny's dismissal of Arthur is at once a paternal and sibling abjuration. At one point Arthur says of Johnny: "This man owes me everything. I feel real sore about him" (154). In Arthur's mind, Johnny and his father are one and the same; both have caused him emotional and material harm. Johnny makes clear the contempt he holds for Arthur and Alf. Nevertheless, at other moments in the narrative Johnny acts as a voice of reason, at one point stressing to his white lover Muriel, "our blood's the same colour . . . is all that matters. Everything that comes out of all human body is the same colour—did you think of that?" (MacInnes 102). Johnny's ability to function as both a narrow-minded figure and a somewhat enlightened one, depending on circumstances, is a testament to MacInnes' aptitude for creating realistically complex characters. Ultimately, Johnny betrays his progressive leanings by emulating his father's actions. Despite his insistence to Muriel about the shared colour of blood being all that matters, he too rejects his child because he is of mixed heritage.

Barbara and Arthur are both of an age (although one not clearly stated) that has allowed them to have certain life experiences and the capability to reflect on them. Arthur, always in and out of jail for "thieving and suchlike" (23), acknowledges that his frequent use of marijuana is a coping mechanism to deal with his hardships: "With this I forget my troubles . . . And of troubles, I say that I have plenty" (93). The nature of his crimes demonstrates an aggressive claiming of what is not given to him freely. With no place to live (as he is denied access to his mother's house) and no job, it is not surprising that Arthur would use dishonest measures to get by. Barbara shares a similar perspective based on her upbringing in Cardiff, an area known for its multicultural composition. She is fully aware of her unfavourable positioning in British society and her limited options for success:

Everyone uses me, white like coloured . . . If you're Butetown born, down Tiger Bay, your only hope is show business, or boxing if you're a boy. But me, I can't even sing a note straight . . . my only hope is to marry me a GI and get right out of this. Or maybe a white boy if he has some *position*, that's what I want, a *position*. (163)

With the dream of making it in show business short-lived due to her lack of talent, Barbara finds a space in the subcultural clubs that she hopes will

increase her chances of finding a way out. She opens up to Pew, who is sexually fascinated with her. Upon first speaking to her he notices her Cardiff accent, which he says “came oddly out of her half-African face, the sound so ill assorted with a physical beauty that had reached her from thousands of miles away” (82). Although it briefly seems as if Pew may offer Barbara the escape she desires, this storyline does not develop. MacInnes’ stereotypical characterization of Barbara and Pew’s response to her runs eerily parallel to the author’s own treatment of black men. Ed Vulliamy describes MacInnes as having a “sexualised idolisation of black life.” MacInnes’ objectifying treatment of his black male sexual partners aligns with his characterization of Barbara as sexually promiscuous. This fictional portrayal of real life desires is in line with what Charles Stember refers to as sexual racism, a form of racism that exploits the inequality of women and men of colour unfortunate enough to be in a subordinate position to dominant (white) men (44).

Barbara Tizard and Ann Phoenix write: “The cultural allegiances of young people are also influenced by gender and social class; to the extent that a black youth culture can be identified, we would expect allegiance to it to be related to gender and social class as well as ‘race’” (38). Both Barbara and Arthur are from working-class backgrounds that influence their lives and livelihood. When Arthur’s mother denies him a place to sleep, he takes to the streets and leisure spaces in an attempt to secure means of living. Barbara makes clear that the need for financial support pushed her into prostitution. Although neither of them possess a fulfilling life and they each engage in shady dealings, both feel comfortable enough to return repeatedly to clubs such as the “Cosmopolitan” and “Moonbeam.” As Rita Felski highlights, shame, the feeling of disgrace or lack in the eyes of others, frequently arises as a result of various forms of social mobility, which provide “an infinite array of chances for failure, for betraying by word or gesture that one does not belong to one’s environment” (39). For Barbara and Arthur, it is not just a word or gesture that betrays them, but rather, their very bodies reveal a “failure” in the eyes of a nation invested in “racial purity.” They may at times be the subject of jokes in the subcultural leisure spaces, but there exists a level of acceptance in those spaces that is nonexistent in mainstream British society.

### The “Tragic Mulatto” in *City of Spades*

In 1928, sociologist Robert Park put forth the concept of the “marginal man,” a figure who “lives in two worlds, in both of which he is more or less of a stranger” (893). Park also assumed that it was this position in society that would make the man who has a divided self more intelligently self-conscious, spiritually unstable and restless (893). Another sociologist, Everett Stonequist, argued that mixed-race people become aware of their

marginality through a rejection that reveals their belonging to what white people consider an inferior group (138). However, presumptions about the experiences and abilities of people of mixed parentage are neither true nor applicable to the lives of each individual. In their 1993 study completed with mixed-race London youth, Tizard and Phoenix found that “the great majority of the sample did not experience the feelings of social isolation and rejection by both black and white groups, which the marginality theorists described as ‘their fate’” (86). As with previous modes of racial thought, race-based presumptions about the lives and possibilities for mixed-race children have been proven inaccurate. In particular, Arthur does not exhibit any of the positive traits assigned to the “marginal man” by Park. In fact, MacInnes characterizes him as a lazy, deceitful thief. Barbara, cognizant of her inability to blend in with one racial group or another, understands how she can be and has been treated poorly by both groups. Although she has experienced poor treatment across racial lines, she still views the black subcultural leisure space as a place of opportunity for her.

MacInnes’ representations of these characters must be addressed in terms of the novel’s apparent adherence to certain racial stereotypes, specifically the literary trope of the “tragic mulatto.” Nancy T. Reynolds states that “mulatto characters have always reflected societal fears, longings, desperation, anger, lust and racism” and that such figures have “reassured readers that the color line is, if not impassable, close to it, and that efforts to cross or eradicate it are bound to end badly” (2). Reynolds highlights how the figure of the “tragic mulatto” has been used to different ends by different socially positioned writers: “Abolitionists used mulattos to epitomize the horrors of slavery; racists used them to illustrate the horrors of desegregation; black writers used them to assuage white fears” (2). Sterling A. Brown, one of the foremost black critics of the twentieth century, completed several essays about the fictional trope of the “tragic mulatto” in literature that provide an excellent review of the use of the mixed-race stereotype. Although Brown’s focus was on American literature, I find his analysis to be very much applicable to MacInnes’ British fiction. Brown summarizes the earliest uses of the “tragic mulatto” figure as exemplifying the divide of the mulatto inheriting the vices of both races and none of the virtues; any achievement is attributed to the white blood in his veins. Brown, writing in 1933, saw the contemporary use as one demonstrating the mulatto as a victim of a divided inheritance: “from his white blood come his intellectual striving his unwillingness to be a slave; from his Negro blood come his baser emotional urges, his indolence, his savagery” (“Negro Character” 194). Brown also details what he views as the gendered characterization of the “tragic mulatto.” He notes that for the male mulatto,

Rebellion and vindictiveness are to be expected . . . the mulatto is victim of a divided inheritance and therefore miserable; he is a ‘man without a race’ worshipping the

whites and despised by them, despising and despised by Negroes, perplexed by his struggle to unite a white intellect with black sensuousness. ("Negro Character," 195)

This symbolically divided inheritance becomes a material one for Arthur as he is cut-off from both the privileges of whiteness and his father's monetary assets. The trope of the female mulatto is much more tragic, in the literal sense:

The fate of the octoroon girl is intensified—the whole desire of her life is to find a white lover, and then go down, accompanied by slow music, to a tragic end. Her fate is so severe that in some works disclosure of "the single drop of midnight" in her veins makes her commit suicide ... It is ingenious that mathematical computation of the amount of white blood in a mulatto's veins will explain his character. And it is a widely held belief. But it is nonsense, all the same. ("Negro Character," 195-196)

Barbara's portrayal seems to adhere quite closely to the figure of the "tragic mulatto" woman; the desire for a white boy with "position" and Pew's comment about her beauty all fall in line with Brown's encapsulation of the literary trope. MacInnes was not alone in his use of the "tragic mulatto" figure as many male writers writing in and about the British postwar context such as George Lamming and Sam Selvon employed the trope in their work. Arthur's characterization does not hold up to all aspects of the stereotype; there are very little positive attributes mentioned about his character, and he does not demonstrate a serious internal conflict about race matters. His hurt stems from lacking the familial bonds he desires. If any part of the trope may apply, his thievery could be read as rebellious. However, I am not convinced that his actions are depicted in the manner described by Brown. In general, Brown reads the mulatto man or woman as presented as a "lost, unhappy, woebegone abstraction" ("A Century," 79) lacking individualization or connection with any lived reality. As Werner Sollors highlights in his consideration of Brown's critique, one of the most regretful consequences of writers focusing on the "tragic mulatto" figure is the avoidance of dealing with the larger social issues at hand (223).

MacInnes' narrative falls prey to adhering to the trope of the "tragic mulatto" in some cases while defying it in others. Caryl Phillips describes MacInnes' narrative style as occasionally "stooping to the level of sociological instruction" (Phillips). MacInnes once argued that writers, "the chief absorbers of 'culture' above the pop level—are themselves prodigiously self-insulated against experience. They just 'don't want to know'" (qtd. in Phillips), as the popular phrase goes. It is evident in *City of Spades* that MacInnes has taken bold steps to address the uncomfortable realities that many of his contemporaries either shied away from or had no interest in tackling. Vulliamy describes him as the chronicler of the immigrant-populated Notting Hill as a non-resident "long-term visitor." However, MacInnes' attempt runs the risk of falling into appropriative narrative failings. Phillips, like Vulliamy, observes MacInnes' helpless linking of blackness to sexuality and "wonders if MacInnes is capable of

talking about black lives in Britain without recourse to sexuality.” These are valid critiques of representation that must be considered in any critique of MacInnes’ work. He may very well be guilty of assigning stereotypical characterizations for some characters in the novel, but what saves *City of Spades* is its voicing of nuanced perspectives for its mixed-race characters. By giving Arthur and Barbara a chance to speak in addition to voicing the views of others in relation to them, MacInnes provides an entry for discussion of the place of mixed-race people in Britain. We do not merely see the characters through the eyes of others but we also hear their stories, their backgrounds, all of which help paint a better-formed depiction of their lives as lived. Here exists the value of MacInnes’ novel to take up the social issues with serious national implications. Though the mixed-race characters do share some of the attributes of the “tragic mulatto” figure, their presence is not emphasized at the expense of addressing social issues—their lives underscore them.

## Looking Back

*City of Spades* provides a story, or history, of importance. The postwar encounters between men and women of different races in the subcultural leisure space had real and lasting effects that forced the nation to look its race problem in the face. What may have been faddish flirtation in between the wars for some became solidified, culturally altering experiences that affected later generations by bringing the happenings and bodies of the leisure space to the forefront of national life. How the nation and its people dealt with the “problem bodies” of mixed-race children such as Barbara, Arthur, and even Johnny’s son demonstrates an unwillingness or inability to accept the progressive modernity so desperately sought. The novel’s two interludes “Idyll of miscegenation on the river” and “Let Justice be done (and be seen to be)!” are poignant moments of exploration into the inner workings of social thought and, as such, reveal the consequences of the contact zones on the levels of man and woman, and man and law. As a work of documentary fiction, *City of Spades* contributes an important perspective of otherwise under-acknowledged history to the discourse of the British postwar period.

## Notes

1. I use this term because of the specific language used in legal texts at the time.

2. The phrase “racial state” highlights what Goldberg views as the intimate relationship between the modern state, how it is formed, and racial definition.

3. Dawson theorizes the contact zone as “a cultural space in which cosmopolitan cultures interacted with one another to create new, radically composite formations that enabled black Britons to militate against exclusionary nationalist traditions in postcolonial Britain” (20). Both are useful analyses, but in this case I prefer Pratt’s analysis as it speaks more directly to the various bodies, cultures and ways of life that inhabit the leisure spaces in the novel.

4. In terms of prostitution, it was illegal for a man to live off earnings made from prostitution, and there are several age-related offences outlined in the legislation. The 1956 Sexual Offences Act is available here: <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/Eliz2/4-5/69/part/I/crossheading/prostitution-procurement-etc>.

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