9. STARING AT THE RUDEBOYS: THE REPRESENTATION OF YOUTH SUBCULTURES IN GAUTAM MALKANI'S *LONDONSTANI* AND JOHN KING'S *SKINHEADS*

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Whilst there has been much work done on the way in which subcultures have been represented in the media, through semiotic display, and in other cultural forms such as musical expression, fashion, artwork and fanzines, there has been very little work done on the way in which subcultures have been articulated in narrative fiction. This is somewhat surprising given the fact that the subcultural novel has been an attendant form of expression mapping the rise of classic subcultures in the latter half of the twentieth century. From the 1950s, for example, we might identify Colin Mac-Innes's *Absolute Beginners*, Alan Sillitoe's *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, and Keith Waterhouse's *Billy Liar*, which to varying degrees offer fictional examinations of identifiable youth subcultures such as the Teddy boys, jazz fans and the emergent mod scene. Richard Allen's series of pulp novels in the 1970s looked at skinhead, suedehead and punk culture (1970; 1971; 1972), whilst several novels associated with more serious literary fiction such as Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange*, Hanif Kureishi's *Buddha of Suburbia*, and Jonathan Coe's *The Rotter's Club* have all included characters who are immersed in varying kinds of youth subcultures. Many other writers have addressed subcultural identity through fiction over the last sixty years or so such as Martin Amis (1973), Iain Banks (1987), Nicholas Blincoe (1995), Nik Cohn (1967), Toby Litt (1997), Bill Naughton (1966), Zadie Smith (2000; 2005), Alan Warner (1995), and Irvine Welsh (1993; 2012).[1] However, the analysis of subcultural fiction seems to have fallen between academic disciplines. Cultural-studies and sociological approaches have, perhaps naturally, tended to focus on media representation, semiotic display, ethnography and the related interpretation of the cultural and ideological meaning of

subcultures.[2] Literary studies, on the other hand, has not really identified subcultural literature as a distinct form of literary analysis, although there has been much work done on other forms of popular genre fiction such as the detective novel, romance and the gothic novel (Ashley 1989; Bennett 1990; McCracken 1998; Phillips 2006; Radway 1984; Spooner 2006).

What is also noticeable, however, when researching this body of fiction is the increase of novels that have incorporated elements of subcultures over the last fifteen years or so. This period, of course, represents the relative decline in "classic" subcultural analysis as produced by the Birmingham and Chicago schools; and one of the arguments I want to put forward in this chapter is that fiction has perhaps filled a gap left by this relative drawing back (or critical reassessment) of subcultural studies as it moved into the twenty-first century. This chapter identifies a rise in subcultural fiction in Britain in the 2000s, citing a range of novels that explore the social and political importance of contemporary and historical youth subcultures in British society by writers such as Monica Ali (2003), Niall Griffiths (2000), Stewart Home (2005), John King (2000; 2008), Courttia Newland (1999), Gautam Malkani (2006), Zadie Smith (2000; 2005), and Alex Wheatle (1999; 2001; 2008). From this list, I will discuss two novels in detail: Gautam Malkani's 2006 work *Londonstani*, and John King's *Skinheads*, published two years later.

Before looking at these examples, however, it is important to note that there are (at least) two types of youth subcultural fiction during the decade, the first of which focuses on past subcultures drawn from a series of periods from the 1950s onwards. This kind of fiction represents a form of nostalgia for the "lost" subculture and for the social and cultural contexts from which it emerged. This is not, however, always a rose-tinted gaze at a lost past. Most of the novels produce what I would call a *critical* nostalgia, a mode that foregrounds political and ideological problems in British society and in the subculture itself, while simultaneously identifying positive aspects of subcultural belonging and expression. This subcategory would include Alex Wheatle's *Brixton Rock* (1999), and *East of Acre Lane* (2001); Stewart Home's *Tainted Love* (2005); and John King's *Skinheads*, amongst others. The second type of novel is located in the contemporary moment and addresses specific state-of-the-nation concerns articulated through a plot line set in a subcultural environment. Examples of this kind of novel include Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* (2003); Courttia Newland's *Society Within* (1999), and Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (2000) and *On Beauty* (2005). These texts address a range of contemporary social and cultural concerns from the perennial identification of youth culture with criminality, antisocial behaviour and promiscuity, to

more serious concerns around the politicization of youth in terms of racist politics and terrorist activity. Gautam Malkani's *Londonstani* can be placed in this category, and it must also be stressed that King's *Skinheads* also addresses the contemporary moment in much of its action as well as containing significant sections referencing the memories of characters back to earlier periods.

It is also useful to consider the particularities associated with the genre and form of narrative fiction generally with respect to the way in which youth subcultures are represented. I want to argue, following Derek Attridge's concept of the "singularity of literature", that fictional representations of youth subcultures offer a specific engagement within the field of subcultural studies that differs in substance from those approaches that take either an ethnographic or cultural-studies approach. Attridge makes the case for literature that it: "consistently exceeds the limits of rational accounting" and this has relevance to the way in which subcultures are represented in fiction (2004, 3). The literary expression of subcultural belonging acts as a textual hinge between real-life experiences and cultural practices and the constitution of subcultures as forms of imagined communities. One of the ways to approach this formal and generic distinction is to consider the relationship of the fictional texts towards the reader.[3] Narratology identifies what it calls the "implied reader", a projected image of the reader produced within the text itself, as opposed to a real reader outside it (Chatman 1978; Genette 1980; Rimmon-Kenan 2002). In the case of subcultural fiction a number of possibilities can be envisaged in this context. Firstly, the implied reader might be a member of the subculture that is represented in the novel. For this kind of reader, judgements of association and authenticity might be paramount, as well as the function of the text to help to consolidate or even legitimize in a literary form the sense of belonging produced by other forms of subcultural practice.[4] Secondly, the implied reader might be someone outside of the subculture, whether that is someone who might be associated with what the Birmingham School would call the parent cult-ure, or indeed someone not of the parent culture but affiliated to another (youth) subculture not described in the book. The function of the novel in this scenario might be akin to a kind of anthropological survey and explanation of an exotic cultural identity and set of practices. Much sub-cultural fiction operates in this way, and indeed MacInnes's *Absolute Beginners*, arguably the first novel that addresses subcultures, has as part of its intention, this kind of survey.[5] It must be stressed, however, that it is too simplistic to divide novels neatly into the categories referred to above,

and in practice most subcultural novels have aspects that relate to each of the two intended readerships.

The way in which the narrative is delivered is also important in examining the representation of the subculture. Many novels elect to convey the events in the first person, usually from a member of (or someone closely associated with) the subculture, producing a certain level of authenticity and insider knowledge. This is the form, for example used in *Londonstani*, although, as we shall see the issue of authenticity is particularly complicated in this novel. The literary critic Andrew Gibson has argued that the use of a "narrator-character" can be useful in closing down the distance between the subject and object of narrative discourse which is especially useful in the articulation of subject positions in fiction: "There is a radical distinctness [...] to the mode of narration that Genette called extradiegetic-homodiegetic [...] The narrator is also an experiencer. He or she is engaged, involved in the world narrated. Thus narration as reflection appears to supervene upon pre-reflective experience. The ethics of narrator-character or focalized narration thus entails a play of levels and dimensions" (Gibson 1999, 27; Genette 1983). On the other hand, third-person narrative can produce the sense of an external perspective on the subcultural characters producing what appears to be an objective critical exploration. However, this does not necessarily mean that a level of empathy cannot be produced using the third person; *Skinheads*, for example, uses a third-person narrative voice, but one that is clearly attuned to the outlook and cultural codes of the characters it describes. In both cases the narrative voice can stand for an individual, but also for a collective articulation of the subculture. It is useful to consider Deleuze and Guattari's work in this context in terms of their discussion of the effect of deterritorialization in the use of specific narrative voices, styles and registers in literature that address the articulation of marginalized identities. In their discussion of Franz Kafka's work they identify a function of narrative to produce what they call a "collective enunciation" in certain kinds of what they call "minor literature" that radically unsettles dominant ideologies:

> The third characteristic of a minor literature is that everything takes on a collective value [...] what each other says individually already constitutes a common action, and what he or she says or does is necessarily political [...] literature finds itself positively charged with the role and function of collective, and even revolutionary, enunciation. It is literature that produces an active solidarity in spite of skepticism; and if the writer is in the margins or completely outside of his fragile community, this situation allows the writer all the more the possibility to express another possible

community and to forge the means for another consciousness and another sensibility (Deleuze 1986, 17).

This "collective enunciation" has particular relevance to subcultural fiction as it emphasizes the way in which formal literary and narrative devices can be deployed in the representation of a radical cultural alterity. This is, in part, the function of the narrative styles in both *Londonstani* and *Skinheads*.[6]

Another consideration to bear in mind when looking at subcultural fiction is the way in which it often intersects with other literary genres. Two are of particular relevance: the *Bildungsroman*, and the state-of-the-nation novel. The *Bildungsroman*, or "novel of development", is a form that is often used in subcultural fiction, as many of the novels dramatize the move from childhood or adolescence into the early stages of adulthood, or detail the establishment of a central character who has in some way been marginalized from mainstream society. The classic nineteenth-century model often includes an orphaned child who after several adventures finds himself reintegrated into a stable societal place or relationship (for example, *David Copperfield*, *Oliver Twist*, and *Jane Eyre*). The state-of-the-nation, or condition-of-England novel, was established in the nineteenth century by writers such as Charlotte Brontë, Charles Dickens, Benjamin Disraeli, Elizabeth Gaskell and Charles Kingsley and addresses social, political and cultural themes through a fictional scenario.[7] Subcultural fiction often includes an element of this kind of social critique alongside its articulation of marginalized positions and cultural politics.[8]

As suggested earlier, the rise in the British subcultural novel from the 1990s onwards roughly corresponds with a decline in traditional sociological and cultural-studies analyses of subcultures. The period from the late 1990s to the present has seen a shift in the way subcultures have been understood and studied, and a range of critical reinterpretations of the methods and approaches established by the Birmingham and Chicago schools. The term post-subcultures has been developed as a way of distinguishing more recent critical interventions from those earlier approaches, whilst at the same time retaining the need to identify and examine discrete (youth) groupings in contemporary society. Post-subcultural analysis tends to emphasize the self-reflexive and self-aware nature of subcultural identity. This self-awareness is often identified in terms of the rejection of claims of authenticity and an emphasis on the textuality and performative nature of subcultures. This represents a move away from the traditional notion of subcultures as identifiable groups that exist in the real world and that are simply "recorded" or "represented" by

sociologists, ethnographers, writers or film-makers. This shift has also emphasized a more critical approach to the constitution and ideologies of post-subcultural identity. As Weinzierl and Muggleton write in the introduction to an important 2002 collection of essays in this context *The Postsubcultures Reader*: "the era seems long gone of working-class youth subcultures 'heroically' resisting subordination through 'semiotic guerrilla warfare'. Both youth cultural activities and the research efforts in this field seem nowadays to reflect a more pragmatic approach compared to the romanticism of the CCCS, whose authors saw a radical potential in largely symbolic challenges" (Weinzierl 2002, 4). These theoretical perspectives are something to bear in mind when looking at both Malkani's *Londonstani*, and King's *Skinheads*.

Gautam Malkani, *Londonstani*

Malkani's *Londonstani* details the exploits of a group of middle-class, west London teenagers from a range of ethnicities who attach themselves to a complex mixture of already existing subcultural identities drawn primarily from black American, British-Asian and south-east Asian contexts. The novel is narrated in the argot of the subculture and delivered through the first-person narration of Jas, who the reader assumes is of Indian, Pakistani or Bangladeshi background, but who turns out, in an awkward twist of identity at the end of the novel, to be from a mainstream, white, middle-class, British background. This ending emphasizes the fact that the constructedness and artificiality of subcultural identity is central to the novel's understanding of youth-group affiliation. Although the ethnic background of the narrator is concealed behind the use of the street argot, his narrative is nevertheless aware of the contradictions of the identity he is involved in performing and of the media's role in this process. This can be seen in particular in this early passage:

> So now it was Ravi's turn to make me jealous with his perfectly timed and perfectly authentic rudeboy front. I still use the word rudeboy cos it's been around for longer. People're always tryin to stick a label on our scene. That's the problem with havin a fuckin scene. First we was rudeboys, then we be Indian niggas, then rajamuffins, then raggastanis, Britasians, fuckin Indobrits. These days we try an use our own word for homeboy an so we just call ourselves desis but I still remember when we were happy with the word rudeboy. Anyway whatever the fuck we are, Ravi an the others are better at it than I am. I swear I've watched as much MTV Base and Juggy D videos as they have, but I still can't attain the right level a rudeboy authenticity. If I could, I wouldn't be using poncey words like attain an authenticity, innit. I'd be sayin I couldn't keep it real or someshit. An if I

said it that way, then there'd be no need for me to say it in the first place so
I wouldn't say it anyway. After all, it's all bout what you say and how you
say it. Your linguistic prowess an debating dexterity (though whatever you
do don't say it that way) (Malkani 2006, 5–6).

The emphasis here is on the problems of appearing to be authentic.
Authenticity in this sense is something to be learned, indeed to be
performed and practised (in both senses of the word). Paradoxically,
authenticity is perceived not as something that comes naturally out of
social heritage, location or background, but something that is constructed
and artificial, and it is MTV Base and Juggy D videos where the nuances
of this subculture are learned. Much of the comic drive of Jas's narrative
comes out of this paradox—this need for him to achieve sufficient
authenticity to be respected within this group. The shift towards the
performative can also be identified in the way in which Jas deals with the
relationship between his lived experience and attainment of an ideal
identity, and emphasizes how subcultures occupy that space between the
real and the imaginary. Adapting Judith Butler's work on gender and
sexuality here, it can be seen that performativity in Malkani's novel em-
phasizes the way in which an individual's consumption of, and affiliation
to, subcultural identity is fluid and dependent on context; rejecting the idea
that individuals are, or ever were permanently attached to a discrete
subcultural identity (Butler 1990).

The work that needs to be done to attain the right level of authenticity
can be seen in a passage which describes his involvement on the margins
of an attack on a white kid who has allegedly hurled racist abuse at the
group:

Teachers or non teachers, fuck it. I had to redeem myself after my gimpy
remark bout spellin Paki with a capital P. After all Ravi had spotted the
white kid in the first place an Amit's helped Hardjit pin him against the
brick wall. But me, I hadn't added anything to either the physical or verbal
abuse a the gora. To make up for my useless shitness I decided to offer the
following carefully crafted comment: Yeah, bredren, knock his fuckin
teeth out. Bruck his fuckin face. Kill his fuckin ... well, his fuckin, you
know, him. Kill him.

This was probly a bit over the top but I think I'd got the tone just right
an nobody laughed at me. At least I managed to stop short a sayin, Kill the
pig, like the kids do in that film *Lord a the Flies*. It's also a book too, but
I'm trying to stop knowin shit like that (Malkani 2006, 9).

The last point Jas makes here is interesting in terms of cultural knowledge
or what we might think of, following Sarah Thornton's adaptation of
Pierre Bourdieu's theories, as subcultural capital. As Thornton argues:

> Subcultural capital confers status on its owner in the eyes of the relevant beholder [...] Subcultural capital can be *objectified* or *embodied*. Just as books and paintings display cultural capital in the family home, so subcultural capital is objectified in the form of fashionable haircuts and well-assembled record collections [...] subcultural capital is embodied in the form of being "in the know", using (but not over-using) current slang [...] both cultural and subcultural capital put a premium on the "second nature" of their knowledges (Thornton 2005, 11–12).

For Jas, knowing about *Lord of the Flies* has become not only worthless, but embarrassing in terms of the cultural grouping in which he finds himself. He is therefore keen to tailor his cultural knowledge in terms that will be recognized within his new grouping.

It is, then, in the context of subcultural capital that the novel builds up a framework of knowledge and ownership of specific cultural signifiers that marks out authentic affiliation within the group. In terms of music the subculture celebrates black American, British Asian and south-east Asian music, and in particular gangsta rap, Bhangra-pop and Bhangra-hip hop crossovers. Several artists are named in the novel including DMX, Usher, the Panjabi Hit Squad, Panjabi MC and RDP (Rhythm, Dhol and Bass). Alongside the music references other fashion and technology products are crucial to the desi subculture's recognition of its own value system, in particular ownership and display of a range of consumer products: German cars, such as "Beemers" (BMWs), "Mercs" (Mercedes), and Audis; European fashion and perfumes such as Dolce and Gabbana, Hugo Boss, and Armani; Japanese, Korean and Scandinavian mobile phones (always referred to as "fones" in the novel) such as Sony Ericsson, Samsung, and Nokia. Knowledge and ownership of these cultural products are all marks of value within the desi subculture as it is presented in the novel, and two things are apparent here. Firstly, the novel shows the globalized nature of cultural products that are integral to this subculture, often presented ironically by Malkani as out of place in the physical location of the teenagers in the west London suburbs of Hounslow and Staines. Secondly, the knowledge and naming of the brands represents kudos within the subcultural identity. In this context, the amount of what we might call product placement is a noticeable feature of the novel and emphasizes the way in which the subculture negotiates the dominant frameworks around the commodification of contemporary culture.

In one sense, then, we have an inversion of the idea of cultural capital, which marks out the cultural territory of the group vis-à-vis the dominant, prevailing or mainstream culture. But the subculture still adheres to the hierarchical structure of the cultural-capital model; the content may be

different but the pattern remains. In this sense the subcultural capital hierarchy for the desis does not reject the capitalist paradigm of a globalized market economy, but recalibrates it in terms of specific objects and cultural signifiers. We are a long way here from the romanticized idea of an oppositional youth subculture as identified in much of the CCCS work of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, for example, Dick Hebdige's reading of the radical potential of punk in the late 1970s (Hebdige 1979).

This suturing between consumption and engagement in the production of consumer products can also be seen in the way music is consumed in the novel. Take the following two examples: "When you're in the back seat a some pimped-up Beemer it's basically your job to be cool. To just chill, listen to the tunes and stare out the window like some big dumb dog with a big slobbery tongue. DMX pumpin so loud out the sound system you can hardly hear what the other guys're saying up front" (Malkani 2006, 16). And later: "The tabla drums from 'Hasdi Hasdi' by the Panjabi Hit Squad fill the Beemer and start bouncing out the windows onto the road an all the concrete car parks that lie along the back a High Street" (Malkani 2006, 88). In these descriptions, the individual members of the subculture essentially become part of the performance of the music. Their broadcasting of it to the non-subcultural world—"High Street"—(what classic subcultural studies would call the parent or dominant culture) represents a kind of vicarious ownership of the music and by extension the ideologies the music promotes. In this context, it might appear that the gangsta rap of DMX is out of place with respect to second-generation, south-east Asian youth in West London, but in terms of the performative and commodity-focused nature of the desi subculture it makes perfect sense to adopt this form of Black American culture as a vehicle for the expression of its own concerns and outlook. However, the novel becomes increasingly critical of the way in which some of the ideologies embedded in popular music culture (gangsta rap in particular) are misplaced in the contemporary British context in which Jas and his friends are located. It is plain that the sexist, homophobic and aggressive outlook promoted in the lyrics of DMX (for example) are in part reproduced in the desi subculture as it is presented in the text. Jas, however, begins to question the ideologies embedded in this cultural interchange, especially with respect to misogynistic attitudes.[9]

As the novel moves forward Jas begins to reassess the very identity he has striven to construct for himself in the earlier sections, and in many ways this processes adheres to aspects of the *Bildungsroman* form. This development is addressed with respect to the mode of voice Jas uses as his

coming-of-age narrative is focused through the relationship between articulation and identity:

> Every time when it's important to use this gob a mine I hear my voice, which never normly works proply an so I panic. It's as if there's some other voice a mine givin it, Don't say that, it'll make u look like a gimp. An so I'll go, Yeh, maybe so, but ... Then I'll realise that the other person, the one I'm s'posed to be talking to, can hear me. So I'll quickly shut my gob, only to hear the other voice go, You fucin sap. Now you look like you can't even talk. Which you can't, you stammerin piece a wasted shit. For fuck's sake just speak up.
> Fuck off, leave me alone. I've just got gunge an shit down my throat.
> Speak up, boy.
> Obviously this voice must know that actually it can't speak up, that it can't talk cos it's me innit, it's my voice. But it keeps tryin anyway. An then another voice, I reckon that make three fuckin voices, will go, Boy? In't no fuckin boy. In't no girl either but in't no fuckin boy (Malkani 2006, 30).

This passage reveals the way in which the novel balances individual identity, affiliation to the subculture, and a notion of the mainstream against which the subculture sets itself. The identity crisis that this mix of affiliation places on Jas results in the internal divisions he registers through the dialogue he often has with his inner self.[10] It is tempting to discuss this aspect of *Londonstani* with respect to a Freudian psycho-analytic model: the first voice in the passage above representative of the id that wants to articulate itself immediately and spontaneously, but which is regulated by the second voice, the ego, that is aware of the way it will sound in a social sphere. The third voice then can be read as the superego (although one adapted to the argot of the subculture) that recognizes that Jas is no longer a boy, but is moving into adulthood and therefore has to adapt to normative modes of expression (which are conventionally gendered in the passage). There is mileage in this kind of analysis, but it would have been interesting if these three voices had different registers. In addition, *Londonstani* adheres to the convention of much subcultural fiction told in the first person of having another member of the subculture who appears to be more in control and who is idolized by the main narrator; a surrogate father figure that is eventually killed off (meta-phorically) before the main character can achieve his/her own place in society. In this text, it is the character Hardjit who supplies this Oedipal framework. It is Jas's eventual distancing from his subcultural roots that allows him to be admitted into the "adult" world, and the novel ends with him adopting a more comfortable understanding of his maturing personal

identity. In this way, *Londonstani* represents aspects of the typical *Bildungsroman* novel with subcultural affiliation presented as part of the process of working through adolescence, an identity that is thrown off in order to allow the individual to establish him/herself in the dominant or parent culture.

John King, *Skinheads*

John King's 2008 novel *Skinheads* provides an interesting contrast to *Londonstani*, especially in the shared west London location of the two novels.[11] King's novel takes three characters associated with different historical moments and versions of the skinhead subculture and articulates their individual relationship to the broader social subgroup. The novel is narrated in the third person, but is focalized through each of the three characters in different chapters, moving between Terry English, an "original" skinhead influenced by the Jamaican rudeboy and ska culture that was exported to Britain in the late sixties; Ray, his younger cousin who was part of the skinhead revival in the late seventies and who represents a much more violent strand and is associated with potentially racist elements of the subculture; and Lol, Terry's son, the only character in this novel who represents the more typical subcultural teenager. The novel, therefore, mixes a critical nostalgia with a commentary on contemporary British society. In doing this it is specifically interested in articulating white working-class identity, an ethnicity that several cultural commentators have argued has been neglected in recent years (Collins, 2004; Jones, 2010). It also attempts to reclaim the stereotypical media image of the skinhead as a racist thug established in part in Richard Allen's series of skinhead novels of the 1970s.[12]

The novel has many of the characteristics of the typical subcultural novel, especially in the identification of specific cultural signifiers that mark out affiliation with this particular subcultural group, and there is detailed attention paid to specific types of fashion, music, cultural locations and practices. This can be seen in an early description of Terry as he gets ready to leave his house:

> Pulling his Crombie on Terry stopped in front of the mirror in the hall and smiled. He dressed smart and moved with the times, always wore a neatly ironed Ben Sherman shirt and Levi jeans, his hair shaved in a number two crop, the main difference from his youth the air-ware soles of the Timberlands he sometimes wore to work. Even those matched the DM model. They said everything was different these days, but nothing had really changed. The skinhead style had gone mainstream a few years ago, even if

> the kids traded under different names. His cherry-red Doctor Martens were upstairs, polished and ready for action, and to this day he never went to football in anything else. DMs and a black Harrington. The combination had never been bettered. He saved his brogues and tonic suit for special occasions, proper skinhead nights. And he was a skinhead all right. One of the originals (King 2008, 7).

What is unusual in the articulation of subcultural identity in this novel is that it has extended beyond the teenage moment. Terry is approaching fifty, and yet the impact that his affiliation to the skinhead culture is seen to have continued into middle age. Musical references, in particular, are used profusely in the novel to indicate emotional states of mind of the characters, political outlooks and an alternative socio-cultural history of working-class Britain in the period form the late 1960s to the present. Several bands and musical styles are referred to and become part of the fabric of the text:

> He left the house and climbed into his Merc, slipped a CD in, eased off the drive to the sound of "Gun You Down" by the Ethiopians [...] parking under the Estuary Cars sign, waiting for "Harry May" by The Business to finish, pumping himself up for the day. It was the only Oi song he listened to, passed on by his nutty nephew, an aggro-merchant gem in the Slade tradition. He grinned. "Gun You Down" meets "Harry May". Two versions of the skinhead world (King 2008, 7–8).

Much of the novel is concerned with this contestation of the skinhead label between the two groups—which reveal some of the contradictions in the media representations of this group and with white, working-class culture generally: "For Terry English being a skinhead is all about the boss sounds coming out of Jamaica—the pumped-up beat and stripped down vocals of reggae music" (King 2008, 53). Terry's resistance to dominant culture represents what Laclau and Mouffe call a chain of equivalence between marginalized identities and politics (1985). The multicultural and the subcultural are in cahoots in Terry's ideological framework, represented early in the novel in its description of Terry's variety of breakfast possibilities: "He was a man pulled in many different directions, the thought of that rogan josh fighting with donner and chips. He was spoiled for choice. Glad he lived in a democracy"; although significantly he plumps for the "Full English" (King 2008, 12).

Terry's love of early ska and rudeboy music reflects his own assertion that he's not political, which is revealed by his acceptance of the diversity of multicultural Britain. This contrasts with his cousin Ray, and in many ways the debates around multiculturalism in the novel are expressed imp-

licitly in the varieties of skinhead culture to which each of these characters hold allegiance:

> Terry didn't have a bad bone in his body, but was no mug. Teased his nephew when he turned skinhead, saying he was more of a punk listening to those Oi bands, decked out in green flight-jacket and black DMs, his head shaved down to the skull. It was a new version of the skinhead look, while the music was a million miles away from the reggae of the original skins [...] Ray eventually fought back saying if he was a punk then Terry was a mod. They were both claiming the skinhead soundtrack (King 2008, 22).

Contestation over the politics and ideologies of the skinhead heritage is clearly apparent, but the nuances within the subculture reveal distinct political and ideological outlooks. Of the two, Ray is presented as the more openly political, railing against what he sees as the chattering classes, and their abandonment, in his eyes, of traditional national values. In fact, Ray's politics elude a conventional understanding of left and right: he is described at one point as believing in "the welfare state and core socialist values" (King 2008, 96), yet at the same time he is angered by "how the England-haters further up the ladder had slagged off the army for caning the fascists and liberating the Falklands. It was the same with Afghanistan and Iraq" (King 2008, 123). King's approach here is to record the ambivalent and sometimes contradictory political approaches taken by some members of the skinhead subculture. However, his tone is very different to Malkani's, as his combination of straight third-person narration and free-indirect-discourse tends to take seriously the viewpoints of the characters. The ironic distance is far less than in *Londonstani*. Part of the text is interested in reclaiming the accusations made against skinhead culture of racism, and in particular the Oi! subculture of the early 80s. One chapter in the novel, "Running Riot in '81" details, through flashback, Ray's involvement in the so called "race riot" surrounding an Oi! gig in Southall on 14 July 1981, where a number of skinheads and members of the Southall Asian community were involved in clashes on the street and around the Hambrough Tavern where the gig was taking place (4-Skins and the Business). The novel claims that the skinheads were attacked on their way to the gig thus provoking the violence. This is clearly an attempt by King to redress the version of events presented in the tabloid press at the time, especially the *Daily Mail*. However, the racist language in the text (albeit through Ray's free indirect discourse) undermines the validity of the "innocence" of the skinheads on that particular occasion.

The third main character in the novel is Lol, Terry's son and Ray's nephew. Laurel, named by his father, after Laurel Aitkin, the Jamaican ska

artist who was highly influential for the first wave of British skinheads in 1960s. The shortening of his name to Lol represents something of a claim for an individual identity outside of the skinhead subculture into which he's born: "being born into a skinhead family you didn't have much choice about how you grew up—the music you liked—he had been raised on his mum and dad's ska records—Ray's Oi!—and Lol was the place where it all collided". Lol provides a coming-of-age narrative in the book, mapping out his adulthood with respect to the various legacies handed down to him by the male role models he has, most notably Terry and Ray, and in a sense is closest to the more typical British subcultural novel (for example, Colin MacInnes's *Absolute Beginners*, Richard Allen's skinhead novels, and Alex Wheatle's *Brixton Rock*).

It is in the intersection of these generations of subcultural identity that the novel attempts to offer a reading of contemporary, white working-class society, offering a range of ideological positions that extends the influence of subcultural meaning beyond the typical teenage years, This novel, then, attempts to offer an articulation of the varieties of white, working-class identity and street politics through its focus on subcultural affiliation and contestation. Terry's acceptance of the broad multicultural heritage that underpins his main cultural affiliation comes into contrast with the more aggressive and monocultural Ray. But for all that, this is a novel which shows that family comes first, and the novel can in part be accused of being apologetic towards some of the racist ideologies it describes. In this sense, *Skinheads* offers an interesting contrast to Malkani's *Londonstani*. Taken together the two works, both being set in almost the same contemporary west London location show something of the atomization of contemporary British culture and the presence of discrete urban "tribes" as identified by the French sociologist Michel Maffesoli in contemporary capitalist societies. According to Maffesoli, the urban working class should no longer be thought of in terms of the masses or the proletariat, but as a series of smaller group affiliations with shared outlooks and more localized forms of collective identity (Maffesoli 1996). In their identification of subcultural groupings both novels reveal this tendency in twenty-first-century British society. Both novels also, in this sense, succeed in dramatizing contemporary political debates around youth, class, ethnicity (and to a lesser extent gender), and reveal some of the ambivalences and debates within wider culture. However, they represent a difference in tone and attitude towards the subculture they are attempting to represent. Whereas Malkani offers a sometimes comic, sometimes serious critical examination of subcultural behaviour and outlook, King's approach is more akin to some of the older CCCS approaches that tried to offer an

authentic representation of marginalized groups, and in King's case a group that he feels has been under-represented both in contemporary fiction and contemporary cultural debate.

Notes

1. There are many others and too many to list here.

2. The British New Left and the Birmingham School pioneered this range of approaches in a British context from the late 1950s onwards, taken up by post-subcultural studies in the 1990s (Bentley 2005).

3. Reader-response criticism is a large area in literary studies, and I am assuming a reasonable knowledge of this field because of lack of space in this essay. Those for whom this area of criticism is relatively new, I would recommend Tompkins 1980.

4. In terms of legitimization, this presumes that literary fiction to a certain extent carries a different kind of kudos and cultural value to other cultural forms that have been deemed to be more "popular". I do not subscribe to the politics of this kind of distinction, nevertheless it is certainly still prevalent, and could therefore act upon the sense of the reader.

5. As well as being a novelist, MacInnes was also a journalist who was associated with New Left publications in the late 1950s and early 1960s. See Bentley 2007, 231–62.

6. It should also be noted that several novels that engage with subcultures are not attempting to celebrate the potentially radical cultural politics, but rather use the subculture as indicative of some kind of cultural decline, e.g. in Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange*, Martin Amis's *Dead Babies*, and although not a novel, Richard Hoggart's reading of the "Juke-Box Boys" in *The Uses of Literacy* (1958, 246–50).

7. The form was initiated by the phrase "condition of England" used by Thomas Carlisle in his pamphlet "The Condition of England Question" of 1839 in response to the Chartist disturbances of the latter half of the 1830s.

8. Again, there are numerous examples, but Martin Amis's *Dead Babies*, and Jonathan Coe's *The Rotter's Club* are good representatives of this kind of approach.

9. The novel cites DMX's "Ruff Ryder's Anthem" at one point which exemplifies the celebration of gun-toting, violence and misogyny in much gansta rap.

10. Split personality is again a feature of much subcultural fiction and film. It plays a significant role, for example, in MacInnes's *Absolute Beginners*, and Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia*, as it also does in the classic 1970s subcultural film *Quadrophenia* (and the Who's concept

album from which the film was adapted). This dual personality and identity crisis is often used to represent metaphorically the differing forces and ideologies acting on the adolescent as s/he negotiates a place in adult society.

11. *Skinheads* is located mainly in Slough, Uxbridge and surrounding areas, with some passages moving the characters to central London.

12. Richard Allen was the pseudonym of the Canadian journalist James Moffatt who produced eighteen subcultural pulp novels in the 1970s and early 1980s.

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