

Anna Lienen

**NARRATING THE
'UNDERCLASS' IN
BLACK BRITISH FICTION**

The Limits of Stereotyping

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1 Introduction

Media discourses in Britain overwhelmingly feature young black men in connection with topics that represent them as violent and criminal threats to society. The various (and somewhat related) discourses around knife¹ and gun crime, gangs² and drug dealing make use of racist ideologies rooted in colonialism that are based on the splitting of the black subject into ‘noble savage’ and ‘violent avenger’ (Hall 1996: 167). Stuart Hall traces contemporary stereotypical representations of black people to colonial ideologies and slavery³ and the way it polarised and naturalised the binary opposition of “‘civilisation’ (white) and ‘savagery’ (black)” (Hall 2013c: 232). The image of the ‘noble savage’ portrays black men (and women) as primitive and infantile but “idealized as morally superior to civilized man” (“noble savage, n.”, see also Hall 2013c: 252). It is “born out of the need of European humanism to rescue itself from its moral purgatory and project itself, and displace, the original inhabitants of Latin America and the Caribbean.” (Sardar 2008: xiv) Its counterpart, the ‘violent avenger’, focusses on the notion of black people as uncivilised, aggressive brutes and rests on white colonisers’ fear of revenge carried out by the slaves (Hall 2013c: 233). Both of these images, thus, reveal little about black people themselves and far more about the fears and desires projected onto them by white colonisers (Hall 1996: 167). The persistence of such “deeper structures of racialized representation” (Hall 2013c: 269) became visible once more in 2021 in racist discourses which split the black members of England’s men’s football team into a profound binary structure: The young black players were either seen as superhuman heroes, serving as a projection surface for a more inclusive English national identity, or turned into scapegoats for the team’s defeat and inundated with a deluge of racist abuse (Carrington 2021, see also Younge 2018).

Stuart Hall highlights the connections between stereotypes identified in Donald Bogle’s study *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks: An Interpretative History of Blacks in American Films* (2003 [1973]) and contemporary representations: Bogle’s *Bad Bucks* are “physically big, strong, no-good, violent, renegades, ‘on a rampage and full of black rage’, ‘over-sexed and savage, violent

- 1 Knife crime in the UK is overwhelmingly associated with and represented as a problem concerning young black men. However, *The Guardian’s* ‘Beyond the Blade’ project revealed that social class rather than race is the common thread (Younge 2017).
- 2 A review on the Metropolitan police’s gangs matrix, which was introduced after the 2011 riots, found “that the representation of young, black males on the Matrix is disproportionate to the likelihood of criminality and victimisation” (Mayor of London Office for Policing and Crime 2018: 4).
- 3 See also Segal (1990: 169–175) and C. Hall (1992: 205–254), who both discuss the construction of black people in Africa and the Caribbean as the ‘other’ in Victorian times.

and frenzied as they lust for white flesh” (Hall 2013c: 239). According to Hall, this stereotype influences “contemporary images of black youth – for example, the ‘mugger’, the ‘drug-baron’, the ‘yardie’ [...] and more generally black urban youth ‘on the rampage.’” (ibid.)⁴ The hypervisibility of these stereotypes vis-à-vis the invisibility⁵ of real black subjectivities makes it extremely difficult for black people “to come into representation” (Hall 1996: 164), i.e. to become visible in their diversity rather than as simplified and stereotypical characters. More than anything, stereotypical representations of black people (and of other marginalised groups) function as a criterion of difference in opposition to which whiteness is constructed as the ‘unraced’ norm (Dyer 2006a: 1, 12; Dyer 2006b: 356; Yancy 2017: xxx). While there is a push towards more diversity in all forms of cultural representations, stereotypical notions of black criminality and violence remain in place in media discourses.

Both Hall (2013c: 263–264) and Ben Pitcher (2014: 40–41) argue for an engagement with stereotypes as a way to defuse their ideological powers. What is more, representations of black masculinity as well as black femininity struggle to disentangle themselves from racist and sexist stereotypes which focus on the black body, especially in terms of its physicality and sexuality (Westwood 1990: 56–57). George Yancy⁶ emphasises this in his theorization of the ‘Black monster’ that is constructed by the white gaze:

From the perspective of whiteness, the Black body *is* criminality itself. It is the monstrous; it is that which is to be feared and yet desired, sought out in forbidden white sexual adventures and fantasies; it is constructed as a source of white despair and anguish, an anomaly of nature, the essence of vulgarity and immorality. [...] Indeed, whiteness is deemed the transcendental norm, the good, the innocent, and the pure, while Blackness is the diametrical opposite. This is the twisted fate of the Black body vis-à-vis white forms of disciplinary control, processes of white racist embodied habituation, and epistemic white world-making. (Yancy 2017: xxx, original emphases)

The stereotypes discussed by Bogle, Hall and Yancy all share the same basic function of ‘othering’ and excluding black men and women. They serve to fix

4 While the main focus of this study lies on stereotypes projected onto black men, there are also ways in which black women are stereotyped. Bogle in particular references ‘the tragic mulatto’ and ‘the mammy’ (2003: 9, see also Hall 2013c: 239).

5 See Yancy, who argues that “[t]he objectification of the Black body raises the issue of Black invisibility and hypervisibility as modes of further erasure of the integrity of the Black body.” (2017: xxx)

6 Although Yancy places his analysis in a US context, his concept of the black monster has been used productively for the analysis for black mixed-race masculinities in both the US and the UK (Joseph-Salisbury 2018).

and naturalise difference and are used as a justification for discriminatory practices. Writing about black criminality in particular, Angela Y. Davis points to “the ideological power of the figure of the young black male as criminal” (1998: 65) which, by focussing on (the fear of) crime, obscures the structural and institutional racism on which this figure is based (Davis 1998: 62, 67, see also Gilroy 2008: 114, 118). Moreover, a focus on the ideological construction of black criminality produces a powerful enemy within “against which the nation imagines its identity.” (Davis 1998: 66, see also Gilroy 2008: 114) Following Althusser (2001: 117–118), one could argue that this ideological notion of the black criminal interpellates individuals as subjects, i.e. it constructs social positions for both a mainstream society of ‘law-abiding’, ‘ordinary’ people and the criminal young black men who are seen as external ‘threats’ to society. What is more, the presence of the stereotypical ‘violent avenger’ in discourses around criminality and violence limits the subject positions available to young black men. They are caught up in a cycle of reality and representation:

The prevailing stereotype projects an image of black male youth as a ‘mugger’ or ‘rioter’; either way he constitutes a violent and dangerous threat to white society, he becomes the objectified form of inarticulate fears at the back of the minds of ‘ordinary British people’ made visible in the headlines of the popular tabloid press. But this regime of representation is reproduced and maintained in hegemony because black men have had to resort to ‘toughness’ as a defensive response to the prior aggression and violence that characterizes the way black communities are policed (by white male police officers). This cycle between reality and representation makes the ideological fictions of racism empirically ‘true’ – or rather, there is a struggle over the definition, understanding and construction of meanings around black masculinity within the dominant regime of truth. (Mercer and Julien 1988: 136–137)

What Kobena Mercer and Isaac Julien claimed in 1988 has lost none of its relevance: little has changed about the “limited and rigid set of guises in which black males become visible” (ibid. 145). This study focusses on the restrictions experienced by the protagonists in black British novels about the ‘underclass’ and the limited visibility of black male authors in the UK (Morris 2021). The latter reached a distinct low point in 2016 when *Mama Can’t Raise No Man* by Robyn Travis was the only debut novel published by a male black British author in the UK. Kadish Morris emphasises the importance of an increased visibility of black British literature by and about black men:

The need for more Black male authors isn’t just a numbers game, it’s a way of ensuring their stories and experience become a part of the historical narrative. They

need to tell their own stories, and enrich the literary canon with new perspectives, giving them space to experiment with uncharted themes and topics. (2021)

Recent publications like *Safe: On Black British Men Reclaiming Space* (2019b) and *That Reminds Me* (2019a), edited and written by Derek Owusu, respectively, *Rainbow Milk* (2020) by Paul Mendez and *Open Water* (2021) by Caleb Azumah Nelson represent forays into providing more diverse representations of black male experiences in Britain. In this context, male black British author JJ Bola argues for “more hopeful stories” rather than traumatic ones (cited in Morris 2021). Bola does not go as far as demanding exclusively positive stories here, but his argument is somewhat reminiscent of past discussions around the ‘politics of resistance’ and the criticism directed at “cheering fictions” (Kureishi quoted in Hall 1996: 171). It indicates that the issues raised then have not been fully resolved: black cultural politics still deal with contesting negative, stereotypical images and fighting for “access to the rights of representation” (Hall 1996: 164). In the face of a lack of visibility of black British literature⁷ by and about black men as well as the persistence of racist ideologies and stereotypes, literary representations may be faced with performing a balancing act: while some may want to charter new territory that goes beyond traumatic stories, engaging with existing trauma can also provide a way to ‘write back’ (Ashcroft et al. 2002: 32) by providing counter-hegemonic narratives that challenge discriminatory discourses. And, of course, some black British writers may want to do none of these things.⁸ It is with the notion of ‘writing back’ in mind that the present work discusses black British novels about the ‘underclass’.

With regard to terminology, ‘underclass’ is a very controversial label whose ideological function serves to stigmatise the poor and to justify their criminal-

7 As David Dabydeen and Nana Wilson-Tagoe point out, the classification ‘black British’ elicits a wide-ranging set of questions: “Does black denote colour of skin or quality of mind? [...] And what are the literary forms peculiar to ‘black’ expression, what are the aesthetic structures that differentiate that expression from ‘white’ expression?” (1997: 10) Gail Low and Marion Wynne-Davis hold that *black* describes “non-white communities that have suffered a history of racism” whereas *Black* “refer[s] to an assertion of a chosen Afro-centric cultural identity” (2006: 3). By contrast, Victoriano R. Arana, while sharing Low’s and Wynne-Davis’ understanding of *black*, notes that *Black* has been “labelled ‘offensive’ by some Britons of African parentage” who prefer the term *African British* instead (2007: ix-x). Arana, as a result, opts for ‘*black*’ “within the forceps of quotation marks” (ibid.). In acknowledgement of the continuing discussions around terminology, recent essay collections on black and Asian British literature by Deirdre Osborne (2016) and by Susheila Nasta and Mark U. Stein (2020), respectively, employ the term *black British* to describe “the writing of indigene black Britons (of African descent) whose work speaks from a sensibility and standpoint quite distinct from the migration or arriviste narratives of previous generations of people in the UK who termed themselves Black writers.” (Osborne 2016: 8, see also Nasta and Stein 2020: 6) The present work follows their choice of notation.

8 For a discussion of the complex question as to what black British literature encompasses, see D’Aguiar (1989), Stein (2004: 8–18), Getachew (2005).

isation and marginalisation.⁹ To indicate the controversial implications of the term, ‘underclass’ is placed in inverted commas in this study. While being critical of this derogatory expression, the present work uses it with regard to black British novels which engage with the limiting effects of stereotypes projected onto young black men (and women) from lower-class backgrounds and thereby challenge the more optimistic trajectories portrayed in black British *Bildungsromane*.

The black British variety of the *Bildungsroman* is a particularly prominent and well-researched genre. Typically, black protagonists in these coming-of-age narratives overcome obstacles, negotiate their various cultural influences and find one or several (prospective) place(s) within society. Using the term ‘novel of transformation’ to emphasise the transformative potential of black British *Bildungsromane*, Mark U. Stein defines the genre in his seminal study as follows:

[...] the black British novel of transformation is not only about the character formation of its protagonists, it is at once about the transformation and reformation of British cultures. These processes of transformation and reformation are not only represented *in* the texts; they are at once purveyed *by* them. The texts are, in other words, part of the processes they deal with. This can be accounted for by the performative functions of the novel of transformation, which involve the construction of new subject positions, the reimagination and redress of the images of Britain including the transgression of national boundaries, the depiction of racism, and, most importantly, the representation, exertion, and normalization of black British cultural power. (2004: 53, original emphases)

However, there is also a downside to this focus on transformative or, in reference to Bola, hopeful narratives. In his conclusion Stein indicates that there is a hype generated around “a handful of black and Asian British writers” (ibid. 183) who are celebrated for their depictions of a diverse Britain. This focus on narratives about an open and multicultural Britain, in turn, enables and supports the construction of a similarly inclusive image of British society. The canonization of a small number of black and Asian British authors, Stein argues, happens to the detriment of any black British literature which does not follow “the stencil created for and also by the novels at the centre of the hype” (ibid.). Even though the original intentions are rooted in the celebration of diversity, this hype fosters a homogenised understanding of what black British literature represents, “with many writers being confined to the margin.” (ibid.) Set against this background, the present study is concerned with the way in which representations of the ‘underclass’ in black British fiction explore counter-hegemonic perspectives of British society that challenge the transformative potential conveyed by black

9 This will be discussed in greater detail in chapter 2.

British *Bildungsromane* and question the accompanying auto-image of British society as open, inclusive and tolerant. In particular, it analyses how literary representations engage with and position themselves against racialised ‘underclass’ discourses and the stereotypes connected to them that construct young black men as criminal and violent. Moreover, it considers the impact of stereotypes and stereotyping processes not only on the level of the narratives themselves but also with regard to the positioning of black working-class authors in and by the publishing industry.

The following two subchapters will contextualise the present work in greater detail. Firstly, they will introduce the selected novels and explain how their respective characteristics shape the analytical trajectory of this study. Secondly, they will illustrate how this publication can be situated within existing research on black British fiction, stereotyping and the publishing industry.

Last but not least, following Simon During’s definition of cultural studies as a “self-reflective” discipline which “needs continually critically to examine itself” (2005: 10) I would like to address my own privileged position as a white female middle-class academic with no real disadvantages. While I undertook this project with a view to addressing the difficulties that young disenfranchised black men have in “com[ing] into representation” (Hall 1996: 164) in a society which often does not try to see beyond the prejudices about ‘black youths’, it is important to me to acknowledge the general power relations which are nevertheless inherent in this project as well as the stark contrast between my own background and the discrimination experienced by the characters in the novels under consideration.

1.1 On the Margins of Black British Fiction: Novels about the Black ‘Underclass’

Elaine Pennicott identifies popular black British fiction as one of the areas in which stereotypes about young black men are addressed and negotiated. She refers to this as the “myth of ‘black youth’ [...] [which] has very little to do with individual young black men. It is the place they visit, along with the rest of the British population, but one they are forced to occupy when the dominant gaze is upon them.” (1997: 154) Pennicott considers the relation between this myth of ‘black youth’ and contemporary black British fiction as follows:

The persistent narratives of ‘Black youth’ are considered, are tried on for size, are played with, rather than simply adopted or rejected. The emergence of a Black British popular literature demonstrates the extent to which young Black people take part actively, albeit less formally and less visibly, in British cultural and political life. (Pennicott 1997: 154)

With regard to the term ‘black youth’ Mercer and Julien point out that it “really means black *male* youth” (Mercer and Julien 1988: 138, original emphasis) and has been hegemonic over black female subjectivities. Considering the current growth of publications highlighting topics that relate to black female experiences, such as *Taking Up Space: The Black Girl’s Manifesto for Change* (2019) by Chelsea Kwakye and Ore Ogunbiyi, *Slay in Your Lane: The Black Girl Bible* (2018) by Yomi Adegoke and Elizabeth Uviebinené and *I Am Not Your Baby Mother: What It’s Like to Be a Black British Mother* (2020) by Candice Brathwaite, it seems that there is an ongoing process of re-setting this imbalance in cultural representations. While this study does not deny or ignore the marginalised status of real and fictional black women as well as non-binary black people, its primary focus lies on the limitations experienced by the black male protagonists in the ‘underclass’ novels due to the heightened visibility and criminalisation of black masculinities in public discourses. It draws on black female characters for contrast and comparison with the male protagonists. This includes, for instance, minor female characters who are stereotyped as ‘irresponsible single mothers’ as well as the strategies some of the black women in the novels employ to avoid being stereotyped. Their experiences and actions provide an enriching context against which it is possible to discuss why the male protagonists struggle to escape from the stereotype of the ‘violent and criminal black man’.

With regard to representational practices, authenticity is a category that plays a particularly relevant role in discussions about the selected novels. On the one hand, notions of authenticity are relative and ultimately constructed.¹⁰ On the other hand, for marginalized groups, who are frequently missing from cultural representations or only feature in stereotypical roles, who are mainly written and spoken about and therefore have to fight for access to representation, being able to narrate stories that reflect their perspectives and experiences is an important aspect of “com[ing] into representation” (Hall 1996: 164). Their stories, as a consequence, regularly attract labels such as ‘authentic’ and ‘real’ by readers who find themselves and their experiences represented in them as well as by publishers who use this label as a marketing tool.¹¹

10 As Pitcher argues in *Consuming Race*: “it is useful to think of authenticity not as an unchanging quality that particular things have or don’t have, but rather as something that gets defined and redefined in the context of consuming practice. As soon as we remove the requirement that there is some kind of essential ‘truth’ to any culture or identity – that, in other words, we are always dealing with different and competing versions or performances of cultural truth – we can see how authenticity becomes simply a trope or resource to be called upon in the attempts of social actors to secure their own association with a particular idea of truth.” (2014: 87)

11 Questions around authenticity and the production of the black British novels about the ‘underclass’ will be discussed in chapter 7.

The novels analysed in this study are selected for their engagement with stereotypical representations of young black men from lower-class backgrounds. Alex Wheatle has been praised by James Procter as one of the few authors writing about the “black male underclass” (2009). His two works *East of Acre Lane* (2001) and *The Dirty South* (2008) are set in Brixton and portray the experiences and perspectives of characters who are rooted in the neighbourhood’s British-Caribbean community.¹² In a similar vein, Courttia Newland’s *The Scholar: A West Side Story* (1997) takes place on the fictional West London Greenside council estate and depicts black British working-class subjectivities (Roberts 2004, Newland and Bose 2013). All three novels by Wheatle and Newland feature male protagonists who experience a conflict between the financial and reputational gains and temptations of a life of crime and violence and the wish to escape from their lower socio-economic background. While race, ethnicity and racism play a role in the narratives, they also noticeably foreground class as an identity factor and its interconnections with gender. As a result, the novels lend themselves to an intersectional reading of the identity factors which contribute to the characters’ marginalised position. The ‘underclass’ stereotype of black men as violent and criminal provides a fitting analytical angle from which this can be done. This group of ‘core texts’ will be compared to two other works: Andrea Levy’s *Never Far from Nowhere* (1996) is a female black British *Bildungsroman* that features two protagonists, the sisters Vivien and Olive, whose respective developments are diametrically opposed. Against the background of Vivien’s upward social and spatial mobility from a North London council estate to art college in Canterbury, it is possible to discuss the factors which hinder or prevent the male protagonists in *East of Acre Lane*, *The Scholar* and *The Dirty South* from following a similar trajectory. Meanwhile, Olive exhibits many similarities with the young black women featured as minor characters in Wheatle’s and Newland’s texts. Based on the depiction of these characters as ‘struggling single mothers’ as well as more successful trajectories such as Vivien’s the present study can broaden its intersectional analysis of black lower-class subjectivities and discuss the extent to which black masculinities and femininities are affected differently by the stereotypes projected onto them. *Pigeon English*

- 12 With the addition of *Island Songs* (2005), *East of Acre Lane* and *The Dirty South* represent a trilogy that covers the experiences of three generations from the same family. As *Island Songs* primarily focusses on the experiences of the sisters Hortense and Jenny in Jamaica, it goes beyond the focus of the present work and is therefore not included here. Two of Wheatle’s other novels, *Brixton Rock* (1999) and *Brenton Brown* (2011a), portray Brenton Brown’s coming-of-age story as a mixed-race teenager and later young man growing up in the care system. The Brenton Brown narratives are set in the same Brixton community featured in *East of Acre Lane* and *The Dirty South*, meaning that characters from his other works sometimes reappear in minor roles. However, because the focus of these narratives lies primarily on Brenton’s complicated relationship with his family and his mixed-race heritage, it is not included in the present study.

(2011) by the white author Stephen Kelman deals with similar topics to Wheatle's and Newland's novels but, crucially, they are narrated from the perspective of the slightly younger Harrison from Ghana, who becomes a victim of knife crime in a London inner-city neighbourhood. Kelman's position as a white author is relevant for this study's discussion of the workings of the publishing industry, but it is also the ideological positioning of the text itself that is significant for the analysis. The portrayal of Harrison as kind and innocent in contrast to the one-dimensional 'evil' black teenage boys who kill him constructs the characters along the racist doubling of "the problem and the victim" (Gilroy 1990: 208). Through the inclusion of *Pigeon English* as a comparative text, the present work can discuss the ideological positioning of the selected novels and the way they engage with the 'limits of stereotyping'.

In this context, it seems fitting to briefly address the slightly different meanings attached to the 'limits of stereotyping' that this study deals with. Of course, first and foremost, stereotypes impose limits by reducing individuals to a few select traits and by naturalising such a representation (Hall 2013c: 247). The novels under discussion demonstrate the extent to which stereotypes about 'black youth' restrict characters in their range of action (and authors in their range of writing). However, they also show how the limiting effects of stereotyping impact characters whose life experiences are more complex than a stereotype allows. In doing so, the narratives challenge the limitations enforced by stereotyping and criticise the ideological structures such signifying practices serve to uphold (Hall 2013c: 248). By evoking empathy¹³ with the characters, the novels can potentially make audiences aware of these processes, and thereby contribute to limiting the power of stereotypes.

The analysis, therefore, examines how the novels by Wheatle, Newland, Levy and Kelman position themselves ideologically against the background of racialised 'underclass' discourses and the stereotypes connected to them. In particular, it will compare and evaluate the different representational strategies employed by the novels with regard to identity construction, the use of space as well as narrative structures. To what extent do these stereotypes restrict characters in their agency? Are there any instances where protagonists can use the stereotypes to their advantage, to potentially subvert hegemonic power structures and transcend the limits of the stereotypes? How are the stereotypes linked to and reflected in the spatial representations of neighbourhoods and council estates featured in the novels? On a narratological level, how do the novels respond to and potentially challenge the implicit narrative patterns that are inherent to the stereotypes? Furthermore, this study will also consider the cultural production

13 Suzanne Keen defines empathy as "the sharing of feeling and perspective-taking induced by reading, viewing, hearing, or imagining narratives of another's situation and condition." (2014: 521) Sympathy, by contrast, expresses compassion *for* rather than feeling *with* someone, like in the expression "I feel for you" (ibid. 522).

of the novels themselves. It will examine the limiting impact stereotyping has on the production and marketing of the novels and their authors by discussing the workings of the publishing industry.

The circuit of culture (du Gay, Hall et al. 2013 [1997]) considers identity construction and representation in articulation with the processes of cultural production, consumption, and regulation. Barbara Korte underlines the relevance of du Gay's and Hall's model with regard to narratives about poverty and precarity. She specifically points out that "agency of representation does not only concern the intratextual dimension of voice, but also the extratextual 'circuit' of production, dissemination and reception [...] to which each representation is submitted." (Korte 2014: 8) The link between agency, representation and cultural production, which Korte emphasises, also informs the perspective with which this study examines the selected novels. It provides the methodological framework through which the present work links the representation of characters in the narratives to the positioning of the novels and their authors in the literary field. The analysis is therefore situated at the intersection of literary and cultural studies by connecting a close reading of the novels with cultural studies perspectives on ideology, stereotyping, identity and representation, and the cultural production of the narratives. Overall, the circuit of culture inspires the structure of the present work which can be divided into four parts.

The first part gives an outline of the theoretical framework on which the analytical part of this study is based. It connects theoretical approaches on power, agency and identity (Althusser, Gramsci, Foucault, Bourdieu) with the circuit of culture model (du Gay, Hall et al.) as well as Hall's perspectives on representation and identity as a way to conceptualise the interrelations between identity construction and the consumption and production of identities and cultural products. Moreover, it discusses stereotyping as a limiting, exclusionary and meaning-constructing ideological practice (Hall, Dyer) by way of the 'under-class' discourse.

The second part, comprising chapters 3 and 4, is concerned with the impact stereotypes have on the characters' identity construction. The analysis will consider how factors of identity such as class, gender, race and ethnicity influence the personal development of the protagonists. As these concepts are relevant for both chapters, they are preceded by an introductory section entitled "Interconnections: Intersecting Factors of Identity Constructions" which provides the conceptual basis for the analytical work in this part. Chapters 3 and 4 then explore to what extent the protagonists are limited by the stereotypes of the 'violent avenger' and the 'irresponsible single mother', respectively. At the same time, they also investigate instances where characters can use the stereotypes to their own advantage and, in doing so, potentially gain agency and transcend the limits of the stereotypes. This part of the study will furthermore take into account the roles played by representatives of the state apparatuses, like the education system

and the police, as well as the characters' immediate social environment. By contrasting the identity construction of the male protagonists in the black British novels about the 'underclass' with those of the female characters, most notably the double protagonists in *Never Far from Nowhere*, and Harrison as a younger protagonist in *Pigeon English*, the analysis will examine the different conditions under which black men and black women are able to enjoy social mobility.

The third part links the limitations discussed in the previous chapter with spatial and narrative strategies. While these two topics might seem quite different in outlook on the first glance, what connects them is the *Bildungsroman* genre, which typically charts an individual's personal and spatial development, concluding with their successful integration into society. Therefore, part III starts with an introductory section entitled "Groundwork and Contexts: The *Bildungsroman* varieties". Chapter 5 discusses spatial restrictions and boundaries and investigates their representation in the novels. In particular, it connects the abstract notion of subject positions with concrete spaces onto which the characters are mapped and the extent to which the characters can shape them. It, furthermore, considers whether characters can explore alternative paths in life through spatial movement away from their respective neighbourhoods. Particular attention will be paid to the engagement with the journey motif in *Never Far from Nowhere* as a female black British *Bildungsroman* compared to the urban fictions by Wheatle and Newland where the characters' movements underline their limitations in terms of spatial and personal development. Chapter 6 analyses the ideological positioning of the novels by drawing on paratextual elements, the use of narrative patterns and narrative perspective as well as of genre conventions and realistic aesthetics. Based on Richard Dyer's tenet that "stereotypes always carry within their very representation an implicit narrative" (2002: 15) the analysis examines how the novels engage with the restrictive patterns seemingly imposed by the stereotypes in order to offer potentially counter-hegemonic positions on dominant ideologies.

Part IV is concerned with the production, regulation and consumption of stereotypes, shifting the analytical focus in two ways. Firstly, it moves from text-immanent perspective on the narratives to the positioning of the novels and their authors in the marketplace. Secondly, its emphasis lies on the production, regulation and consumption of the novels themselves. For its initial observations, this chapter draws on studies that examine the role and treatment of writers of colour¹⁴ in the publishing industry more generally before concentrating on Wheatle, Newland, Kelman and Levy in particular. Furthermore, it pays particular attention to the way in which stereotyping informs the reception of the novels and their authors on this superordinated level, limiting what is published and how it is promoted. These processes, of course, ultimately also

14 The term is used to refer to black, Asian and other ethnically minoritized authors.

shape the (readily) available literary works academics are able to consider for their research projects.

1.2 The Treatment of Stereotypes about the ‘Underclass’ in Black British Fiction

The field of black British fiction¹⁵ has grown steadily since the second half of the 20th century¹⁶ with the late 1990s marking a particularly prolific time for novels by black British writers (Nasta and Stein 2020: 11). From the 1980s onwards academic research has gradually responded to contemporary literary work by black British authors: in the form of bibliographies and anthologies that aim to map the field,¹⁷ with periodicals such as *Wasafiri* (1984–today) and *SABLE LitMag* (2001–2010) as well as essay collections.¹⁸ The publication of book-length studies that examine black British novels seems to have increased considerably only in the 21st century (see also Nasta and Stein 2020: 11–12).¹⁹

While the present work, as explained earlier in this chapter, generally uses the term ‘black’ to describe writers with Afro-Caribbean heritage, it needs to be noted that up until the 1980s, and at times even later,²⁰ the term ‘black British literature’ was also used to refer to writing by both black and Asian British authors (Nasta and Stein 2020: 9). Even though differentiations in terminology – such as ‘British Asian’, ‘black British’ and, more recently, ‘British Muslim’ – have

15 For critical perspectives on black British poetry, see for instance Lawson Welsh (2016) and Ramey (2004), for an overview of contemporary black British drama, see Brewer et al. (2015).

16 Of course, black authors in Britain also produced literary work before mass immigration after World War II. For critical perspectives on earlier black British writing, see for example C. L. Innes’ *A History of Black and Asian Writing in Britain 1700–2000* (2008), *Before Windrush: Recovering an Asian and Black Literary Heritage within Britain* edited by Pallavi Rastogi and Jocelyn Fenton Stitt (2008) as well as contributions covering the 18th to early 20th century in *The Cambridge History of Black and Asian Writing* (Nasta and Stein, eds., 2020). Older publications on the topic include David Dabydeen’s study *The Black Presence in English Literature* (1985), which covers, among others, Renaissance drama, imperial fiction from the early 19th century as well as black writers in the 18th and 19th century. Together with Paul Edwards, Dabydeen also edited the anthology *Black Writers in Britain (1760–1890)* (1991).

17 See e.g. Gupta (1986), Dabydeen and Wilson-Tagoe (1988), Wambu (1998), Newland and Sesay (2000), Procter (2000), Arana (2009).

18 See e.g. Nasta (1991), Wisker (1993), Arana and Ramey (2004), Sesay (2005), Low and Wynne-Davies (2006), Arana (2007), Dawson (2007), Eckstein et al. (2008), Osborne (2016), Davis and Fuchs (2018), Nasta and Stein (2020).

19 See e.g. Reichl (2002), Procter (2003), Stein (2004), Ball (2006), Cuevas (2008a), Frank (2010), Rupp (2010), Gunning (2010a), Kamali (2016), Ahrens (2019).

20 Indeed, Tobias Frank’s 2010 study still uses the label ‘black British literature’ to cover works by black British and British Asian authors.

become much more common over the years, many essay collections and anthologies cover the work of writers of African, Caribbean and Asian ancestry together. Indeed, Deirdre Osborne stresses that this kind of clustering was necessary in the past to gain the attention of publishing and academia (2016: 9). The following research overview will predominantly focus on black British authors and research on their work but based on (past) practices of discussing black and Asian British novels together, at times under one umbrella term, it will occasionally include critical perspectives on British Asian fiction.

In comparison to terms such as ‘British novel’ or ‘British author’, the label ‘black British’ implies an ‘otherness’ that is not sufficiently covered by ‘British’ alone and therefore in need of additional qualification. Questions about marginality feature strongly²¹ in the analytical angles taken up by most critical perspectives on black British novels, with many debating questions of identity and belonging.²² As Nasta and Stein point out, it is difficult for black British authors to “ge[t] published and reviewed in contexts that do not only focus on racial and cultural identities” (2020: 15). Other research continues along this trajectory, focussing on specific factors such as race and ethnicity and related discussions of racism.²³ Drawing on cultural studies’ focus on the anti-essentialist conception of identity, secondary literature emphasises hybrid identity construction in novels where (usually second-generation) protagonists negotiate their diverse cultural influences and backgrounds. Class attracts comparatively little attention and is rarely at the forefront of scholarly analyses. It is only in recent years that class reappears as a topic of discussion in a few publications which analyse earlier black British writing from the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s (e.g. Weedon 2020, Bekers 2021). Overall, one might argue that with regard to black authors and characters questions of class and social inequality are predominantly seen through the lens of race (Hall et al. 2013: 386).

Critical perspectives on black female-centred (and often also black female-authored) novels tend to entail discussions of gender and sexuality.²⁴ More recent scholarship increasingly focusses on intersectional readings of black British femininities.²⁵ Analyses of masculinity in black British fiction are less common,²⁶ with a few more works to be found on British Asian and British

21 The reception of Helen Oyeyemi’s work is often cited as an example of the ways in which questions of belonging dominate in critical perspectives on black British fiction and contrast markedly with the author’s inspiration for her writing (Hoggard 2014).

22 See e.g. Sommer (2001), Pichler (2004), Weedon (2004), Arana (2005b), Lima (2005), Thompson (2005), Nyman (2009), Frank (2010), Upstone (2015), Laursen (2020).

23 See e.g. Reichl (2002), Walters (2005), Oyedele (2005), Gunning (2010a, 2010b), Laursen (2015).

24 See e.g. Nasta (2000), Weedon (2008), Sandapen (2009), Frank (2010), Rastogi (2016), Muñoz-Valdivieso (2016).

25 See e.g. Tönnies (2021), Bekers (2021), Scafe (2022).

26 See e.g. Evaristo (2013), Ledent (2011), Flotmann-Scholz and Lienen (2019).

Muslim masculinities,²⁷ especially Hanif Kureishi's novels.²⁸ More recently, secondary literature has appeared which is concerned with black British writing that features LGBTQ-identities (e.g. Batra 2016, Houlden 2020). A particularly popular avenue of scholarly debate are spatial representations,²⁹ with London³⁰ often playing a particularly central role.³¹ This thematic focus frequently leads back to discussions of belonging in the form of geographical and metaphorical representations of 'home' and of active constructions of identity in and through engagement with (London) city spaces. A genre that combines all of these aspects particularly well and recurrently features in secondary literature is the black British *Bildungsroman*.³² Last but not least, it should be noted that many of the critical perspectives referenced above also combine their main focus (e.g. space) with additional analytical angles (e.g. gender).

When one widens the perspective to consider secondary literature on contemporary British novels in general, the notion of the marginal status of black British (and British Asian) fiction becomes even more pronounced – with regard to the authors and the works selected as well as the critical perspectives employed.³³ The list of writers whose novels regularly feature in publications that survey the 1990s and 2000s³⁴ is limited to a few names, most of them British Asian rather than black British: Salman Rushdie, Hanif Kureishi, Zadie Smith,

27 At the same time, it is important to note that apart from established authors such as Zadie Smith, Monica Ali and Andrea Levy, female black and Asian British writers have been “historically underrepresented” (Rastogi 2016: 79). Research tends to overlook the work of earlier novelists such as Buchi Emecheta or Beryl Gilroy (Warmington 2016: 264). What is more, as Ledent observes, in recent years attention has been directed towards international black women writers like Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie rather than black British female writers (2016: 243).

28 See e.g. Sincock (2018), M. Mirza (2017), Winkgens (2011), Ranasinha (2009).

29 See e.g. Procter (2003), Pérez Fernández (2009), Upstone (2009), Ahrens (2019).

30 Indeed, as Deirdre Osborne emphasises: “The British countryside (England, Scotland and Wales) remains the province of whiteness, the rural idyll functions as a nostalgic ideal of Britain prior to post-war migration, and is a situation reflected in the paucity of black and Asian work that is set in the countryside, where there has been no wholesale elimination of the racism that minority ethnic people can encounter there.” (2016: 7)

31 See e.g. Low (1999), McLeod (2004), Fischer (2004), Sandhu (2004), Ball (2006), Cuevas (2008a, 2008b), Perfect (2014), Tönnies and Lienen (2018).

32 See e.g. Stein (2004), Sommer (2001), Jussawalla (2008), Frank (2010), Tönnies (2013, 2021), Ahrens (2019), Bekers (2021), Neumann (2021).

33 Osborne references Dominic Sandbrook's study *The Great British Dream Factory* (2015) as a particularly conspicuous example of research which mostly overlooks black British and British Asian novelists (2016: 16).

34 The focus lies on these decades as they encompass the time frame in which the novels analysed in the present study were published.

Monica Ali and Andrea Levy.³⁵ What is more, there is a tendency for black and Asian British novels to feature as ‘other’ perspectives within these survey publications rather than as part of a heterogeneous field of contemporary British fiction.³⁶ Even more so than in publications that explicitly concentrate only on black British fiction, the thematic focus is thus often on race and ethnicity, with identity factors such as gender and class gaining far less attention and questions about aesthetics³⁷ frequently overlooked (Osborne 2016: 8–9). Although this practice makes black British fiction visible, it implicitly sets it apart from ‘British fiction’. Moreover, it homogenises black British fiction and reduces analyses of it to a small set of critical perspectives. Ultimately, this practice thereby reinforces the marginal status of black British fiction.

The work of some authors, like Rushdie or Smith, has become part of the canon of contemporary British fiction, and is at times discussed without labelling their writing as ‘British Asian’ or ‘black British’. However, it is worth considering to what extent the “status and recognition” bestowed onto “certain works and writers [...] rely upon perceptions of how closely a black or Asian writer can be aligned to the white-majority culture and its traditions.” (Osborne 2016: 14, see also Ledent 2016: 243) While acknowledging the impact race, gender and class all have in how “mainstream or marginal” black and Asian writers are “published, publicised and positioned”, Bénédicte Ledent particularly foregrounds the relevance of class and *habitus* as the central criteria based on which “some writers are more easily granted insider status than their peers.” (2016: 243) While a number of reports over the years have examined and criticised the lack of diversity within a publishing industry marked by middle-class whiteness (e.g. Kean 2004, 2005, 2015; Saha and van Lente 2020, 2022), this has not yet been linked with a detailed study of the works and authors affected by it. When it comes to analysing fiction (black British or other), research usually either focusses mainly on the publishing industry and the conditions under which authors and their work are published and marketed³⁸ or it concentrates on examining the novels themselves.

As illustrated above, a majority of the critical perspectives on black British novels from the 1990s and early 2000s have a strong tendency to focus on hopeful trajectories where characters overcome adversity and use their individual agency to construct a metaphorical and geographical space for themselves in British so-

35 See e.g. Bentley (2018), English (2006) Acheson (2017), Childs (2012), Acheson and Ross (2005), Bradford (2007), Tew (2004).

36 See e.g. Bentley (2018), Hubble et al. (2015), Bentley et al. (2015b), English (2006), Bradford (2007).

37 It seems that discussions of the aesthetics of black British fiction are overwhelmingly confined to publications solely dedicated to this field of writing, such as Arana (2007).

38 See e.g. Huggan (2001, 2020), Squires (2007a), Ponzanesi (2012, 2014), Brouillette (2011), Koegler (2018).

ciety. This reflects the mood of black British fiction published towards the end of the 1990s described by John McLeod as “millennial optimism” (2004: 179). Although stereotyping is referenced in secondary literature on black British novels, it rarely features as a central analytical focus, even though – similar to spatial representation – it binds together various central questions around race, ethnicity, gender, class, and, more generally, identity. As contesting stereotypical representations continues to be a central aim of black cultural politics (Hall 1996: 164), it follows that literary research is drawn to examining characters who challenge, or even overcome, stereotypes and whose development involves a transformation of British society (Stein 2004: 30). The index of the *Cambridge History of Black and Asian British Literature* even includes an entry specifically concerned with this aspect, i.e. “stereotypes, challenging of” (Nasta and Stein 2020: 727). What is barely examined are the limits that stereotyping processes create, neither with regard to literary representations that address this issue nor how it affects what kinds of authors and novels are published. Even though the present work thus stays within the thematic framework of questions about identity, it tackles the topic from a perspective that existing research hardly addresses by focussing on the limiting effects of stereotyping. Furthermore, this study stands out against other research by combining the analysis of the literary works with a discussion of the conditions under which they are published and marketed. The circuit of culture provides a framework which makes this possible.³⁹

Apart from Pennicott’s (1997) essay where she delineates the relationship between dominant ideologies and stereotypes about young men in Britain and the role of popular black British literature, there are no studies which investigate this particular topic in any depth. There is some research on the novels by Wheatle, Newland, Levy and Kelman, respectively, but hardly any which considers their narratives from the point of view of stereotypes and stereotyping practices in the context of identity and representation as well as consumption and production. Sara Upstone remarks on *The Scholar’s* engagement with the stereotypes about young black men: “the tragedy we feel at the novel’s ending comes because Newland has humanised Cory and Sean to be so much greater than these stereotypes.” (2017: 92) However, this is not followed up by an analysis of how this humanisation is brought about by the narrative. Building on James Procter’s critical perspective on Alex Wheatle’s writing, one could argue that the “black male underclass” is not only “surprisingly neglected in available literary representation” (2009) but also merely features on the margins of academic research.

39 While not typically used in research at the cross-section of literary and cultural studies, du Gay, Hall et al.’s model is employed with regard to identity constructions in cultural and media studies. This encompasses, for instance, research on news reports about immigrants (Chivaura 2020), public relations of sports teams, international brands and individual actors (Scherer and Jackson 2008, García 2021, Han and Zhang 2009, Ayeni 2018), the fashion industry (Ebner 2007), and social media (Oishi 2019).

In US-American studies, there are a couple of publications which address representations of black lower-class communities or of black masculinities and share some topical connections with the present study. *Street Literature: Black Popular Fiction in the Era of U.S. Mass Incarceration* (2015) by Kristina Graaff is situated at the intersection of ethnographic fieldwork and literary analysis. Graaff examines the construction of and the symbiotic relationship between physical and literary prison and street spaces and she discusses their role in the production and distribution of the novels. The examples of ‘street literature’ (and their authors) that Graaff analyses inhabit an even more marginal position than the works by Wheatle and Newland discussed in the present study. Not only do Graaff’s authors publish and distribute their work themselves, but their writing is also often produced in prison where a substantial part of their readership can be found as well. As a result, the challenges they face around the production (e.g. writing conditions in prison) and distribution (e.g. selling in the streets, getting stocked in local bookshops) of their work differ somewhat from those experienced by writers of colour who work with mainstream publishing. However, the underlying reasons for the marginalised positions of Graaff’s authors – systemic racism and classism – is something that Wheatle and Newland share, even though they seem comparatively more established based on their publishing situation. Still, while *Street Literature* also addresses racist discourses around black criminality and, briefly, the black *Bildungsroman* as a genre, it does so with a focus on the (re-)configuration of street and prison spaces through the novels against the background of the racist law enforcement and prison system of the US. Dennis Rome’s *Black Demons: The Media’s Depiction of the African American Male Criminal Stereotype* (2005) investigates the role of mass media in creating and perpetuating negative stereotypes of black men in the US to uphold white supremacy and its real-life consequences for African Americans. It covers news programmes, reality and fictional crime TV series, Hollywood films and gangster rap. With the exception of gangster rap, *Black Demons* mainly focusses on images projected onto black males by white-led media outlets with a view towards suggesting how existing prejudices can be unlearned. The present study, by contrast, takes on a different perspective by examining novels written by black authors. It considers how both the characters in the novels as well as the authors themselves are affected by stereotyping practices. With a focus on poor black and ethnic minority children and adolescents, Alice Stieffermann’s study *Growing Up Poor: Documentary and Fictional Representations of the American Inner City (1991–2011)* (2019) discusses dominant stereotypes and discourses on poverty in the US. Stieffermann’s research encompasses a wide range of texts from fictional novels and films to literary journalism and documentary photography. *Growing Up Poor* finds that detailed depictions of the children’s perspectives engender empathy in audiences. Moreover, it identifies the children’s innocence as a motif that is used to challenge stereotypes about poverty. While

the present study similarly considers the impact of narrative perspective on conveying counter-hegemonic positions on the 'underclass', the analysis of *Pigeon English* suggests that a focus on innocence, while seemingly positive on the surface, can also be connected to framing characters as 'noble savages' or 'Toms', thereby remaining within the binary structure of racialised representation.

In the area of British cultural and literary studies, Katie Beswick's *Social Housing in Performance: The English Council Estate on and off Stage* (2019) and Emily Cuming's *Housing, Class and Gender in Modern British Writing, 1880–2012* (2016) are characterised by their interest in cultural representations of council estates, which are relevant for chapter 5. While both researchers choose (council) housing as their main focus rather than stereotypes, they connect this with sets of analytical foci (i.e. gender, class, and race) that are similar to the present work. Beswick explores how theatre and performance practices (rather than novels) produce representations of council estates and their residents. She critically examines questions around authenticity and the extent to which social realism can challenge dominant discourses on council estates. Her discussion of black masculinity and resistance by way of Mark Duggan's representation in the media shares some thematic overlap with this study. Within the longer time frame of Cuming's study, her chapter "Estates: Social Housing in Twentieth- and Twenty-First-Century Literature and Culture" is relevant for the present work as it addresses the role of council housing in fictional and non-fictional cultural representations, with an examination of female coming-of-age stories in narratives and film that also briefly mentions *Never Far from Nowhere* (see also Cuming 2013). While the present study, therefore, shares some thematic overlap with these two publications, it contributes new perspectives that expand the existing state of research by discussing black British fiction dealing with the 'underclass' with a focus on stereotyping practices that also includes the impact stereotypes have on the production and marketing of the novels (and their authors).

Due to their marginal position within black British fiction, there is not much in-depth research on the novels by Wheatle and Newland. Their work is predominantly referenced in overview articles that form part of essay collections on black British (and British Asian) literature. *The Scholar, East of Acre Lane* and *The Dirty South* are often grouped together as examples of black British urban fiction,⁴⁰ with additional references to even more marginal works such as *Toy Soldiers* (2000) by Stephen Thompson and *The Street* (1999) by Biyi Bandele as well as female-centred and -authored *Rude Girls* (1996) and *The Best Things in Life* (1999) by Vanessa Walters. Several overview articles have appeared over the years which categorise Wheatle's and Newland's work as popular black British urban

40 It should be pointed out that 'urban' or 'ghetto' are considered loaded adjectives since they are often used in references to black people or black culture without mentioning race (Boakye 2019: 198–203). In his alternative dictionary, *Black, Listed* (2019), Jeffrey Boakye lists both expressions under the section 'Loaded Terms: Blackness in the white gaze'.