Anna Lienen (Bochum): “Deconstructing Gender Stereotypes about ‘Black Youths’ in Contemporary Black British Fiction?”

Abstract

There is “a limited set of guises in which black men become visible” (Mercer and Julien 145), and most of these reinforce prejudices about violence and hypermasculinity. Young black men, in particular, find themselves reduced to stereotypes which derive from black masculinity being pathologised by the state apparatus and its fear and/or envy of black masculinity and the potentially counterhegemonic power ascribed to it. By contrast, novels by black authors dealing with the so-called ‘black male underclass’ (such as Courttia Newland’s *The Scholar: A West-Side Story*, 1997, as well as *East of Acre Lane*, 2001, and *The Dirty South* by Alex Wheatle, 2008) give a voice to a group which is usually only spoken and written about. These texts go beyond the dominant hegemonic narratives and emphasise how the construction of gender intersects with ethnicity, racism, class and sexuality.

In doing so, the novels highlight the difficulty in disproving these gender stereotypes in an environment where peer pressure as well as racial discrimination (by an overwhelmingly white male police force) turn ‘toughness’ into a necessary survival strategy (cf. Mercer and Julien 136f.). For example, one character arms himself to seek revenge for a harrowing police beating, another deliberately engages in crime to become a “badman” (Wheatle 2008, 54) and gain the acceptance of his friend. This paper aims at exploring the challenging (and controversial) question to what extent novels such as Wheatle’s and Newland’s actually help to deconstruct or, as some readers might argue, end up perpetuating images of hypermasculinity, violence and crime.