‘Styles, Codes and Violence’: Subcultural Identities in Contemporary Black Writing of Britain.

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In an apparently unmotivated scene in Mike Phillips’ *Blood Rights* (1990), the black private eye, Sam Dean, takes time out of his ongoing investigation to tutor his son on the visual details with which he can learn to map London streets and chart a safe course through the potential dangers therein. Dean is a voice of authority here not simply because he is a detective professionally attuned to, and experienced in, drawing significance from outwardly meaningless phenomena, but also because he is a veteran of London street life. He has grown up as a first-generation black Briton in the 1960s and 70s, and he is accustomed to, and has learned to anticipate, unprovoked acts of racial hostility from different social groups and from representatives of the white Establishment. The cognitive map he conveys to his son is based upon ethnic differences providing visual clues to the levels of threat they pose to a young black boy. The lesson is successful and his son learns that certain groups of people and certain situations are dangerous and to be avoided: he has been given the means to read the streets. However, this intergenerational wisdom is somewhat destabilised as his son asks Dean why he always says hello to other black people on the street, whether he knows them or not. Dean replies, “‘In the old days . . . we’d speak because it would be kind of reassuring to be in contact with another black person’” (Phillips 1990:166). What has always struck me as interesting about this exchange is that Dean’s son is offered tuition on what differentiates groups of people but must ask what binds them together. Perhaps Dean senior’s sense of a communal identity based upon a shared history of migration is less evident to his son than it is to him: what does this suggest, I wonder,

about the discursive construction of identity in black British literature that deals with characters two or more generations removed from the experience of migration?

In an analogous scene, Dennis Huggins, Alex Wheatle's central protagonist in *The Dirty South* (2008), performs his own cognitive mapping of South London: "Tulse Hill estate where a trailer load of eastern European people and white trash families live . . . Myatts Fields estate where all the crack houses used to be . . . Angel Town where every second brother seems to be packed with a gun. Stockwell, where the rude boys show off their guns in the local youth club and Vauxhall where the Portuguese shottas sell the best hash in London . . ." (Wheatle 2008:2). Dennis, like Dean's son, is a second-generation black Briton albeit ten years his senior. It would be widely inaccurate to suggest Dennis has lost a colour consciousness or that he perceives white Britain to be any less harmful to his and his peers' life chances than Dean does. However, Dennis has learnt to map London differently to Dean and the semiotic maps he employs owe less to colour codes than to postcodes: it is not so much whom you encounter, as where you encounter them that demarcates Dennis' London. This intensified parochialism drives the narrative of *The Dirty South* as it is Dennis' failure to observe the boundaries set out in his own mapping that leads to the tragic resolution of the novel.

In this chapter I will seek to explore the ways in which youth identity and affiliation is portrayed in works by two key figures in contemporary black British writing, Alex Wheatle and Courttia Newland. It takes a specific focus upon teenage culture and style as a means of picking out intergenerational differences not simply to suggest that youth culture defines itself in opposition to the generation that precedes it, since this is a well-established principle. Instead, it is to suggest that these books illustrate what I want to call the 'new parochialism' in which youth identity in working-class London draws upon an intensified sense of affiliation to a local area, estate or postcode. One consequence of this new parochialism is an alteration in the former codes of affiliation based upon a Caribbean heritage expressed through formal and family history and musical style which is supplemented (rather than replaced) by local histories, often held at the level of orality and myth. Central to the 'new' histories in each of the texts are myths of violence and reputation. In this

respect, Sam Dean's colour coding of London becomes more complex, since the postcodes of the new parochialism blur the boundaries of 'race' and introduce new affiliations and disaffiliations that pertain more to new local histories than to the histories of migration.

The concept of a new parochialism is drawn from Homi Bhabha's intervention in 1999 when his 'Manifesto' stimulated a series of discussions and events leading to the *Reinventing Britain* Conference hosted by the British Council to debate British identities. In 'The Manifesto', Bhabha describes a contemporary reality in which, "the new cosmopolitanism has fundamentally changed our sense of the relationship between national tradition or territory, and the attribution of cultural values and social norms". In the 'new cosmopolitanism', "culture is less about expressing a pre-given identity (whether the source is national culture or 'ethnic' culture) and more about the activity of negotiating, regulating and authorising competing, often conflicting demands for collective self-representation" (Bhabha 1999:39). In these propositions Bhabha is seeking to progress beyond the multiculturalist debates of the 1980s wherein the notion of core and marginal cultures were challenged by decentring a dominant cultural tradition -- in this instance, Englishness -- in preference for a model of competing ethnicities within which no ethnicity could claim a prior value or innate or historical privilege. Instead Bhabha proposes a hybrid culture within which the essentialising tendencies of 'equal but different' are rendered "increasingly sterile". Central to Bhabha's vision of a new social landscape is the impact of a loosening of nationalist identities through the cultural borderlessness of transnationalism captured in the "hybrid cosmopolitanism of contemporary metropolitan life" (Bhabha 1999:39). One way in which this new, or hybrid, cosmopolitanism might be illustrated is through reference to 'Fresh for '88', a short story by Courttia Newland from his collection, *A Book of Blues* (2011).

In the story, a pair of London youths prepare for an MC contest being held in Wormwood Scrubs park. Here, 1988 is significant because it is "the year young London went hip-hop crazy" (Newland 2011:40). The enthusiasm for American style is evident in the street fashion of baseball caps, baggy jeans and unlaced Nike Air Max trainers and the narrator, Stone's, eagerness to compare

Harrow Road flats with Brooklyn brownstones from *The Cosby Show* (Newland 2011:39). However, this is not an unmediated adoption of American style: 1988 was also the year that British hip-hop established itself through the Demon Boyz and their *Recognition* album. Hip-hop, with its basis in sampling and borrowing, translating and transforming, ties closely to Bhabha's notion that there is "no ideal norm of perfect translation or appropriation possible" when hybrid works contest origin or ownership. In this story, hip-hop is "an all-encompassing culture" (Newland 1999:40) not a narrow tradition and, for Stone, the MC performance is not premised upon the reverential replication of original performance, but on the spontaneous interactivity of DJ, MC and audience: "nothing supersedes that split-second moment of finding my flow and placing the words exactly on the beat . . ." (Newland 2011:45).

Stone's bid to win the MC battle ends in failure as a fight breaks out in the audience during his act and disrupts his performance. Dispirited, he wonders whether his opinion of the power of London hip-hop was exaggerated and would itself always remain parochial compared to the US acts. However, the transformative power of hip-hop to establish new configurations is re-affirmed in the denouement of the story: reflecting on what seems to be his perennial bad luck and persecution, Stone finally asks his friend, Reka, "'You think all dis shit happens to me -- to *us* -- because I'm white?'" (Newland 2011:60). Throughout the story Stone's character, voice, dress style and musical tastes have been indistinguishable from his (presumably) black associates and Newland's intention is clearly to draw attention to the implied reader's assumptions about 'racial' markers. In addition, Reka's reply to Stone's query, "'Nah, blud'", suggests that such markers are no longer relevant to a hip-hop generation who find a common identity in musical subcultures that transcend national identities and cultural heritage: 'blud', here, is invested with additional meaning.

I do not want to overburden this short story with too much social significance, although some of what I have said here in terms of a shared street style that crosses ethnic boundaries can also be observed in Noel Clarke's screenplay for the film, *Kidulthood* (2006). The revelation of Stone's ethnicity, also, is not uncommon narrative ploy and parallels could be drawn with Gautam

Malkani's *Londonstani* (2006), for example (it remains interesting, however, that a writer of Newland's experience and stature knows he can still exploit this authorial technique effectively). Similarly, UK hip-hop is not the first example of white youth adopting black cultural styles, although I would argue that this is a considerably more thoroughgoing adoption of black style than might be found amongst the white adherents of jazz, blues and reggae in earlier decades. However, I do want to return to Stone's question: if Reka responds negatively to racial difference being the source of their woes, one might ask; why *does* all this happen to them?

Among Stone and Reka's associates are two older youths, P. Nutt and Sy, who bully Stone and, through the threat of physical violence, dominate the basement where the youths practice on borrowed record decks. Newland leaves it unclear whether Stone attracts particular attention from them due to his small stature rather than his ethnicity, not least because all the youths are equally intimidated by them. However, Nutt and Sy's reputation for violence is not wholly negative for Stone. Whilst window shopping away from their home neighbourhood, Stone is approached by a group of boys at a bus-stop who try to rob him. The stand-off is only ended when one of the group recognises Reka and Stone as being associated with Nutt and Sy. Now assumed to be under the protection of the duo, and with the unspoken expectation of reprisals should they go through with the robbery, the group withdraw: reputation and the assumption of local loyalties is enough to give them pause for thought. This correlation of locality, loyalty and violence is evident elsewhere in the story. Reka and Stone end relationships with girls mostly due, as Stone reflects, to the "potential danger of visiting an area where he didn't live" (Newland 2011:46). Similarly, Wormwood Scrubs Park is not just a site for competing music, it is also a ground for battling postcodes: "Everyone from every manor in London came [to it], which made it a mad, bad and dangerous place to be" (Newland 2011:46). Taken together, the 'shit' that happens to Stone emanates less from what he looks like, so much as where he comes from in the form of a heightened parochialism. Sy and Nutt must maintain their reputation for violence; that reputation must be recognised as an attribute of a highly localised area of London; and respect for it must be maintained irrespective of ethnicity.

This scenario is some distance from the positive potential of Bhabha's project to encapsulate a reinvented Britain within which a hybrid cosmopolitanism transforms the relationship between identity and a national tradition or territory. Instead, this new cosmopolitanism has been supplanted by a new parochialism in which the meanings of place are being reinvented by emerging urban histories that secure highly localised attributes of identity, communality and belonging. So, where Sam Dean was once able to point to the reassurance of a shared black history held together by oral links back to the Caribbean, arguably this oral history is not shared by his son, hence the confusion that sits behind his question. New social histories and identities are being forged that help to redefine association of identity to place on much more restrictive historical and geographical bounds. To see if this can be illustrated elsewhere, it may be helpful to look at the longer chronological range afforded by Alex Wheatle's novels.

Brixton Rock (1999) is Wheatle's first novel and introduces the central character, Brenton Brown. Brenton has been placed into care at a young age and *Brixton Rock* recounts his reunion with his Jamaican mother and intense affair with his half-sister, Juliet. In the sequel set sixteen years later, *Brenton Brown* (2011), Brenton's unresolved feelings for Juliet, complicated by the growing demands of their child Breanna to know the truth of her parentage, eventually leads Brenton to migrate abroad. In both novels, Brenton's life in care is related through dreams and flashbacks and tells the tale of a black identity that must be learned through adopted styles and codes of behaviour and allegiance. In this respect, Brenton is severed from the pre-given identity of a national culture (as described by Bhabha) and so is his pick-and-mix invention of an identity, drawing upon diverse cultural sources that makes him a hybrid character, perhaps more so than the biology of his dual heritage.

Brenton is put into care because his mother, Cynthia, has an affair with a white man while her husband is in Jamaica. Pregnant when her husband returns, Cynthia is forced to give Brenton to his father who is unable to provide for him when his own family refuse to support a dual heritage relation. Brenton is brought up in Pinewood Hills, a care home in the countryside well to the south of

London, and the novel itself is set in the hostel in Brixton Brenton is placed in when he turns eighteen. As might be apparent from this short summary, Brenton lacks a clear cultural heritage, having been brought up amongst largely white people and his two principal sources of comfort are constructed ones: first a scarecrow called Mr Brown that he became fixated on as a child at Pinewood; and secondly, a poster of James Dean in which he continues to confide whilst at the hostel. The extent to which he must learn to be black is finally recounted by his hostel mate, Floyd, as an anecdote in *Brenton Brown*: "'His accent! There was some kind of BBC, Surrey fuckery going on with his accent . . . I had to teach him to walk like a Brixtonian . . . He had no riddim, man. No bounce . . . And then I tried to teach him how to crub with a girl'" (Wheatle 2011:240-1). It is while Brenton is still learning to be Brixtonian that he encounters his 'nemesis', Terry Flynn. Brenton initiates a longstanding feud with Flynn after he punches Flynn for calling him a "liccle half-breed" at a blues party (Wheatle 2011:19). Subsequently Brenton hospitalises Flynn by hitting him with a beer glass in a pool hall fight. From this point, Brenton is embroiled in a battle over reputations, since the ghetto press now has Brenton dubbed as "'the guy who crucially dealt with Terry Flynn'" (Wheatle 2011:21). This feud will lead eventually to both Flynn's death when he falls under a tube train during a fight with Brenton and to Brenton's enduring Brixton fame as the 'Steppin' Volcano': a nickname that companies him through most of Wheatle's novels. As Floyd puts it, "'Mashing up Terry Flynn has turned you into a celebrity'" (Wheatle 2010:249).

As the 'Steppin' Volcano', Brenton acquires a place in local mythology akin to Sy and Nutt in Newland's story and this reputation brings with it the expectation of behavioural patterns and other identity markers that Brenton learns alongside his education in being Brixtonian. For example, in the opening scenes to *Brixton Rock*, he deliberately adopts (and regrets) a "'bad bwai' pose" for the benefit of the police officers (2010:3). In this respect, the cultural markers that Brenton also adopts, including the confusing combination of Jamaican reggae tapes and the James Dean poster that populate his hostel room, are themselves cut adrift from any authenticating point of origin: Brenton is not adopting a roots culture in terms of tracing back to his Caribbean roots. This becomes most

evident in *Brenton Brown* when Brenton decides that his undimmed feelings for Juliet mean he must leave England altogether to achieve a fresh start. Whilst considering likely places to settle, Jamaica is quickly dismissed: "'I wanna go somewhere with decent weather. A place where I can hear reggae music. Forget Jamaica, I don't wanna spend my days there living behind some serious metal grille at the front of my yard and see a goat shitting on my gates and chickens walking around like they want to mug you . . . Maybe the US?'" (Wheatle 2011:173). This is not the only point at which Brenton has dismissed a link back to the islands. Comparing the decoration of his mother's house with that of his friend Floyd's mother he notes, "Mrs Francis's front room is similar to the way Mum had hers. The same black-and-white photos on their mantelpiece, Jamaican scroll souvenirs hanging from the walls . . . What a load of fuckery! . . . Did Jamaican women who came over here in the fifties and sixties all agree to have the same shit in their front rooms?" (Wheatle 2011:134). Crucially, though, this is not as simple as saying that Brenton lacks the traditional family upbringing to provide old country ties to the Caribbean through memory and extended transnational family networks. For Brenton, this severance with the Caribbean is also true of his contemporaries for whom the notion of roots begins in Brixton. As he compares his sense of belonging to his friends, Floyd and Biscuit, Brenton states, "My roots are not in south London. Not like it is with them. They belong here. This place has defined the way they walk, talk and carry themselves" (Wheatle 2010:246).

The definition or construction of identity in this instance is as temporally and geographically specific for Brenton's friends as it is for Brenton himself. This ultimately begs the question of how Brixton has defined its black inhabitants, or perhaps more correctly, how they define it through their own cognitive mapping and history making. Linton Kwesi Johnson, a pioneer of black British culture from the 1970s, chronicled the same cultural terrain as Wheatle from the position of a first-generation migrant. His first volume of poetry, *Voices of the Living and the Dead* was hailed by Farrukh Dhondy as having "contributed the first collective myth of English poetry for centuries". Johnson's poetry, he continues, brings the "experience of locality for his own audience -- Brixton, Railton Road, Shepherds, the telegraph, Sofrano B, Neville King . . . what are these? Ask any young

black in London" (Dhondy 1974:133-4). In an interview Wheatle affirms his own belief in the continued significance he assigns to the importance of locality in the creation of identity through storytelling and the ownership of a parochial history: "I feel the need to write those stories [of the black experience] because they're being neglected . . . we as a people have to write our own stories, otherwise, as what happened in the past, they'll be told for us. And, so, I feel this obligation sometimes to tell our stories" (Immonen 2007b:125). It is therefore interesting to see in Wheatle's novels the way in which this communal history of resistance gets diminished in the new parochialism of styles, codes and violence.

As noted above, the Brixton Riots in 1981 mark a crucial juncture in both the history of black Britain and the generational shifts represented in Wheatle's novels. Wheatle's views on the riots are made clear in an interview with Linton Kwesi Johnson where he states,

> people sometimes forget that these were the biggest upheavals on the mainland for 100 years, and that important moment in black history has not been properly recorded on film or drama or anything else, only in literature by you [i.e. Johnson]. That is worrying. I'm thinking that this part of our history will just be wiped away and forgotten unless someone else makes up their mind to address it. I think it needs to be addressed because our children need to know where they come from and of the struggles we have waged thus far (Wheatle 2009:37).

Here again, the point of origin for the purposes of identity is assumed to be British. In addition, the riots mark a significant place in recent black history, not least because the Scarman enquiry that ensued brought an official account of the daily experiences of black Britain into the political and public domain. Specific reference is made in the Scarman Report to the work of the Special Patrol Group and the operation of the 'sus' laws that permitted almost random stop and search activities that were widely perceived to be used to target black youths. *East of Acre Lane* is set against the local events leading to these riots and Wheatle acknowledges the Scarman Report as a source for his novel alongside the anecdotal memories of his friends, joining together the official and unofficial

accounts. Wheatle's novel is significant because it dramatizes both an important historical event and a parallel parochial history. At the start of the novel Brenton's place in the "annals of Brixtonian folklore" as the 'Steppin Volcano' is reaffirmed with Biscuit's nine-year-old brother, Royston, already in awe of being in the presence of a "real life Brixtonian bad man" (Wheatle 2006:24). By the end of the novel, this reputation would be enhanced as Biscuit, Brenton and others kill local drug lord and pimp, Nunchaks, in an endeavour to free Biscuit's sister, Denise, from prostitution. This reputation again falls into local legend and reappears in *The Dirty South* where Dennis boasts about his father's (Biscuit's) fame as a 'shotta' involved in the death of a local "Bricky crime lord" (Wheatle 2008:3). It is in the intergenerational transition from Biscuit in *East of Acre Lane* to his son, Dennis, in *The Dirty South* that one can observe the loss of a Caribbean communal history in favour of the new myths of parochialism.

East of Acre Lane features another recurrent character in Wheatle's fiction, the Rastafarian, Jah Nelson. Everton Pryce has described the link between Rastafarianism and reggae music in a manner that accords with Wheatle's sense of owning and linking together style, history and culture: 'Reggae music . . . played the role of linking the style and form of Afro-Jamaican street-culture to the style and form of young Afro-Caribbean blacks in Britain, and, with the rastafarian movement, gave these same youths an orientation . . .' (Pryce 1985:37). Nelson attempts to bind Biscuit into this orientation so he so can "try fe do somet'ing better, and nah get 'imself moulded by the environment where 'im live" (Wheatle 2006:43). He does so by trying to provide Biscuit with a grounding in African history to help him see beyond the daily exigencies of being the breadwinner for his family (in the absence of his father) through dealing drugs and petty crime. Nelson is not wholly successful as Biscuit is swept along by the events that will lead to the fatal encounter with Nunchaks. However, at the close of the novel Biscuit sends Denise to Nelson to help her recover from the trauma of her abuse and witnessing Nunchak's death (Wheatle 2006:306). Nelson's insistence that "Education is de key" (Wheatle 2006:308) will be picked up again in *The Dirty South* where it is dismissed by Dennis as being his father's "mantra" (Wheatle 2008:4). It is here that the

cognitive map of London that Dennis described in my introduction can be placed into a longer history of youth subcultures into the (a)history of the new parochialism.

The Dirty South follows Dennis Huggins' entry into the world of drug-dealing in Brixton at the age of fourteen, until his eventual incarceration six years later. As noted above, Dennis's father, Biscuit, is the key character in *East of Acre Lane* who also appears in both *Brixton Rock* and *Brenton Brown* as a friend of the eponymous Brown during their youth in the earlier novel, and as adults in the latter one. Taken together, these loosely connected novels extend the range of Wheatle's novels from Brown's birth in 1963 to Brown's death and Dennis's release from prison in 2006. At the centre of this forty-year period sits the 1981 Brixton Riots around which the events of *East of Acre Lane* turn. Reading these novels as an account of the attitudes, codes and relationships of two successive generations of black Britons that come after Sam Dean (whose experience stretches back to the 1958 Notting Hill riots) allows us to think of Biscuit and Brenton as second generation and Dennis and his peers as third generation black Britons. In doing so, one can detect a social process within which the new affiliations, styles, codes and disaffiliations of the new parochialism get established.

Pivotal to understanding Dennis Huggins' character is recognising his highly parochial sense of place and the codes of behaviour that accompany such localised awareness. It is with a deliberate irony that Wheatle has Dennis dismiss his father's continued preoccupation with the "numbers of young black employed in 19 fucking 80, long forgotten riots . . . and how Margaret Thatcher messed up the country" (Wheatle 2008:4). Neither is Dennis attracted by his African-Caribbean heritage. He has been taught black history by Jah Nelson when he was young, but he only uses this to impress Akeisha, his long-term love interest, and he only does so because another of his father's contemporaries, Yardman Irie, makes an appearance at a poetry jam in Brixton. Here, Dennis is utterly dismissive of the appeal to African roots by the host "'Queen Manashmanek from the golden and prosperous lands of Nubia'" (Wheatle 2008:110) and the consciousness-raising acts that precede Irie's performance. At the end of the evening, Dennis makes a clumsy attempt pass at Akeisha and she sees through his pretence: "'You've just spent the last half hour giving me a lesson

in Jamaican history. And now this! I thought you was different from the rest, Dennis. But you're just like the other brothers in Angel Town and Bricky, just looking for a wok and you don't care how you get it . . .'" (Wheatle 2008:119). This rejection of a cultural heritage and history is matched by Dennis' rejection of anything more recent. Even as he sits in his cell awaiting release, Dennis rejects new myths of belonging: "burn the mayor's theory of multicultural society. It ain't real." (Wheatle 2008:5)

What is real for Dennis is reputation. Without knowing the truth of events, he boasts about his father's past as a 'shotta', his association with the 'Steppin' Volcano' and their part in the murder of Nunchaks. In very much the same way as Stone, in Newland's short story, is attuned to the association of postcodes, codes and violence, Dennis tries to locate himself onto the cognitive map of London. Like Stone, he is aware of the dangers of the new parochialism, but unlike him, Dennis ignores his own advice and finds himself the object of an ambush in Peckham. Dennis is robbed, stripped and hospitalized but the core issue is less about money than a failure to observe the "rules of the ghetto" (Wheatle 2008:36). Having completed their assault, the leader of Dennis's assailants crows, "'Who's he think he is? A Brixton shotta coming down our ends and he wasn't even packed'" (Wheatle 2008:36). When his partner-in-crime, Noel, visits Dennis in hospital, he is unsympathetic: "'People been chatting . . . How you got honey-trapped by some bitch from Peckham ends. It's not good for our rep, bruv. Some brothers been laughing about it, saying that you and me are pussies. I ain't tolerating that'" (Wheatle 2008:43). Dennis and Noel plan a revenge attack wherein Brixtonian honour is satisfied and their parochial reputation restored as a more severe beating using iron bars and bricks is carried out on the original culprits.

In taking this action, Dennis and Noel are sustaining a parochial map of London in which the physical reality of violence and the discursive reality of reputation collide with the effect of strengthening their sense of collective identity: being a Brixtonian triumphs over any other form of possible allegiance. If such loyalties are highly parochial, they are also a-historical insofar as enmities are formed (as they are in Newland's story) from places of current residence rather than a longer

history of migration. Consequently, Dennis's mapping of London is a radically synchronic arrangement that is dismembered from history. His tragedy is thus a failure to engage with history over both the short and the long term. For example, the cognitive map of Brixton Dennis provides in the introduction to the first chapter of the novel finally describes the "Camberwell end of Coldharbour Lane where so-called Muslim gangs cruise and jack any shottas and run protection rackets" (Wheatle 2008:2). It is precisely here and under these circumstances that he and Noel are ambushed once again, this time leading to Noel's death and Dennis's subsequent revenge killing of Courtney Thompson.

This potentially explains the complex interaction between reputation and reality in the new parochialism and particularly in its dynamic nature. If Brenton learns to adopt and adapt style to become a Bricky celebrity, the same is arguably true of Dennis who is suspected of pretence even by Noel: "'You're a pretend badman, Dennis. Everyone knows it. A motherfucking wannabe. You ain't too different from those white and Asian people who try to talk black. You're a motherfucking pimp! Pimping from street culture'" (Wheatle 2008:45). Similarly, Thompson is one of a group of young Blacks who have recently converted to Islam in the novel and who are bringing a new edge of violence to the area. For Dennis, these are merely "so-called" Muslims and he suggests that their religious conversion is nothing more than the adoption of a new dissident street style that will not last (Wheatle 2008:116). It is certainly true that Thompson fails to lead a recognisable life of Islamic convictions and that he is refused entry to a mosque by Muslim elders. In addition, Thompson and his gang demand that Noel 'converts' to being a Muslim as they beat him to death. But this is no religious crime and its motivation sits somewhere between parochial drug warfare and reputation since Dennis and Noel have 'disrespected' Thompson in front of his crew over a girl. In all three of Wheatle's novels, then, the death of a character serves not only to remove a violent threat, it also serves to place the surviving characters into a parochial history of London through which they and others can locate themselves. It is the new parochialism that Dennis uses to define his life -- ironically since the legend of the killing of Nunchak conceals the fact that the trigger was pulled by

Biscuit's white neighbour, Frank. Thus Dennis's own mantra, "only in Bricky", that also punctuates *The Dirty South* starts to feel as much of a historical as a social confinement.

Throughout *The Dirty South*, Dennis constructs a parochial London that continually reinvents codes of difference from which identity can emerge. For Bhabha, this emphasis upon the constructedness of identity characterises the multiculturalist thinking of the 1980s that missed the transformation of the public sphere occasioned by the new cosmopolitanism. However, this transformation is rejected by Dennis as itself being a myth and his sense of localised identity based upon a parochial map of London is abandoned as he plans a new life in Leicester upon his release. This instability of character bears considerable resemblance to Stone in Newland's 'Fresh for '88', who adopts a language and a culture wholeheartedly but never feels fully as though it is his own. This is a theme that runs through Wheatle's novels, most notably in the character of Brenton Brown and thus confirms the role of the new parochialism in constructing identity through style in a process of affiliation and disaffiliation.

What this chapter has tried to show is a reversal of the positive trends gestured towards by Bhabha's proclamation of a transformed social space brought about by a new cosmopolitanism within a transnational, metropolitan Britain. Bhabha was working in response to the multiculturalist thinking of the 1980s in which multiple ethnic identities were envisioned as evidence of a plural society. For Bhabha, emphasising 'different but equal' policies operates within old paradigms of identities authenticated by myths of origin that were unsustainable in contemporary Britain. In these novels and short stories depicting black, teenage life in London within the same period, I think illustrations of new identities and loyalties being formed can be found. These loyalties are not based upon pre-migratory origin, as Bhabha suggests, but neither do they provide a transformed social space. Instead, a new parochialism based upon postcodes and local mythologies of reputation and social competition and rivalry occupy the space previously filled by social Rastafarianism in the 1970s. If social identities are being reconfigured in this new parochialism, they are not being

weakened and the social signifiers of style and affiliation remain strong. So much so that, as Dennis watches his friend Noel being beaten to death in *The Dirty South* over a wholly predicted matter of reputation, one assumes these are not the 'teenage kicks' that The Undertones sang about.

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