Ethnic and Cultural Diversity in Ben Aaronovitch's Urban Fantasy Cycle *Rivers of London*

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Abstract
Drawing on Paul Gilroy's discussion of postimperial melancholia and conviviality, this article aims to examine Ben Aaronovitch's *Rivers of London* as a voice in the discussion on British multiculture. Contextualised through a comparison to a popular culture spectacle and discussed within the theoretical framework of urban fantasy, the narrative is read as consciously challenging the "habits of Whiteness" (Young 2016) of fantasy fiction. The analysis focuses on the diversions from the white-centric paradigm by discussing the construction of the mixed-race protagonist, the juxtaposition of postimperial and convivial attitudes and the use of the fantastic to expose various approaches towards difference.

Keywords: Ben Aaronovitch; *Rivers of London;* urban fantasy; diversity; conviviality; postimperial melancholia.

Introduction

One of the questions faced by multicultural societies nowadays is how to approach the ethnic and cultural differences that have become their defining feature. According to Paul Gilroy, one reaction may be labelled as "postimperial melancholia", or "an inability even to face, never mind actually mourn, the profound change in circumstances and moods that followed the end of the Empire and consequent loss of imperial prestige" (Gilroy 2004: 98). Affecting both the native-born British citizens and the newcomers from the territories of the former Empire, it manifests itself as "shock and anxiety that followed from a loss of any sense that the national collective was bound by a coherent and distinctive culture" (Gilroy 2004: 98). Another approach to difference, opposed to postimperial melancholia, is "conviviality", understood as "the processes of cohabitation and interaction that have made multiculture an ordinary feature of social life in Britain's urban areas and in postcolonial cities elsewhere" (Gilroy 2004: xi). Implying neither "the absence of racism" nor "the triumph of tolerance" (Gilroy 2004: xi), the term entails, as Amanda Wise and Greg Noble emphasise, not only "'happy', 'festive'

and 'fun' forms of togetherness" but also "negotiation, friction and sometimes conflict" (Wise and Noble 2015: 425). Due to its capacity for encompassing both positive and negative aspects of experiences related to living in multiculture, Gilroy's concept of conviviality is frequently used in sociological studies to examine the opportunities and challenges created by everyday diversity, especially in urban environments and with reference to the practices employed by young generations (Valluvan 2016). As multicultural experiences have been increasingly reflected in contemporary literature and popular culture, Gilroy's notions of postimperial melancholia and conviviality can serve as useful tools for their interpretation.

Ben Aaronovitch's *Rivers of London* cycle[1]—a narrative categorized as urban fantasy and developing since 2011—offers an intriguing vision of racially, ethnically and socially diversified London, which is additionally touched by magic and inhabited by fantastic creatures. This emphasis on diversity, coupled with the introduction of a fully developed mixed-race protagonist, makes the novels stand out from many other specimens of urban fantasy, which more often than not still follow white-centric patterns. While some non-white characters are sometimes added in a symbolic effort of inclusivity, there is usually little attempt at going beyond reductive stereotypes.[2] In this article Aaronovitch's narrative, contextualised through a comparison to a popular culture spectacle and discussed within the theoretical framework of the urban fantasy subgenre, is read as one more voice in the ongoing discussion on the British multicultural present. The main aim is to examine the ways in which *Rivers of London* challenges the "habits of Whiteness" (Young

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[1] So far the cycle comprises seven full-fledged novels (*Rivers of London*, *Moon Over Soho*, *Whispers Under Ground*, *Broken Homes*, *Foxglove Summer*, *The Hanging Tree* and *Lies Sleeping*), a novella (*The Farthest Station*), and six graphic novels, initially published in separate parts as comics (*Body Work, Night Witch, Black Mould, Detective Stories, Cry Fox* and *Water Weed*).

[2] It can be argued that urban fantasy texts touch upon the issues related to race and racial tensions by construing the supernatural race/species (e.g. vampires, warewoves, etc.) as the "other" opposed to the human race. The treatment of fantastic creatures can be read as a reflection of racial thinking in our culture. Still, the default human race in such stories is usually portrayed as predominantly white, which is noticed by Young in her account on urban fantasy in American TV (Young 2016: 144).

2016) of fantasy narratives by focusing on the issues of diversity and exploring various approaches to difference in the society represented in the novels.

One of the most significant attempts at portraying the best of British history and culture in recent years was the 2012 Opening Ceremony of the Summer Olympic Games in London. Entitled *Isles of Wonder* and directed by Danny Boyle, the nearly four-hour event consisted of different sections that were meant to reflect Britain's historical, cultural and literary heritage, including its popular manifestations, such as music, film, and children's literature. Starting with the vision of a bucolic countryside, the show included representations of the Industrial Revolution, celebrated the National Health Service, and stressed the significance of various groups that had influenced and changed the image of modern Britain (e.g. the suffragettes, the Jarrow Crusaders, the first Caribbean immigrants). Having attracted around 900 million TV viewers worldwide, the spectacle had both national and international importance, and can be seen as an attempt "to represent 'Britain' via narratives that respectfully acknowledged its 'past' while also promoting a positive portrayal of Britain's 'present'" (Black 2016: 786). This respectful acknowledgment of the past clearly lacked allusions to British imperialism, which corresponds to Gilroy's observations that in Britain the history of the Empire has become "a source of discomfort, shame, and perplexity" (Gilroy 2004: 98). Instead, the *Frankie and June say... thanks Tim* sequence of the show affirmed the multi-ethnic, multicultural "present" by featuring an "ordinary" mixed-race London household along with over 1400 young dancers of various ethnic backgrounds. Taking the form of a night-out of two young people, the segment depicted the "young" Britain as open, diverse, vibrant, and united through both pop culture, especially music, and contemporary technologies.

Consistently projecting a vision of London, and consequently of Britain,[3] based on "the idea of Jerusalem, of a better world that can be built" (Boyle 2012: 11), the event extolled the positive aspects of multiculture while ignoring any problematic ones. Such approach can be

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[3] This is not to suggest that London automatically stands as a metonymy for Britain. Here, however, such a connection can be made on the assumption that the artistic programmes of the Opening Ceremonies of the Olympics generally aim to represent the host countries' history and cultural identity.

seen as a means of construing both the "preferred" past and present, with the present staged as a certain "multi-ethnic fantasy" (Silk 2014: 281).[4] In fact, ethnic diversity is sometimes identified as intrinsic to Britishness, the very foundation of which stems from Britain's geographical composition and depends on heterogeneity and hybridity, thus allowing for redefining minority cultures as inherent to the nation itself. As Anne-Marie Fortier notes, "the Britain of the twenty-first century is one where the capacity to assimilate and absorb other cultures is celebrated" (Fortier 2005: 560), which is also the explicit message of the Opening Ceremony of the London Summer Olympic Games. And yet, as Jack Black's analysis of the press coverage of the Games reveals, the picture of the British understanding of diversity is much more complicated. In fact, it reflects Littler and Naidoo's concept of "white past, multicultural present", that is an alignment that "occurs simultaneously as a lament and a celebration—a celebration of our nation being modern, young, hip and in tune with the globalised economy as well as harbouring a nostalgia and lament for a bygone contained, safe and monocultural world" (Littler and Naidoo 2004: 338).

Ben Aaronovitch's *Rivers of London* cycle is similar to the Olympic Games ceremony in some respects. Like the *Frankie and June say... thanks Tim* segment, it continuously projects a positive vision of multicultural Britain, especially London. Furthermore, both the show and the novels explicitly refer to popular culture as a specific platform that allows participation across various social, cultural and ethnic backgrounds. While the spectacle paid tribute to British popular music and film heritage, Aaronovitch's cycle playfully refers to various pop culture phenomena (e.g. *Doctor Who, The Lord of the Rings* and Harry Potter). In both of them, however, popular culture functions as a medium facilitating everyday conviviality and becomes instrumental in forming

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[4] Similar attempts to portray the "preferred present" can be found in mainstream realistic literature, where, as Sarah Upstone argues, a form "utopian realism" is employed by many contemporary novelists to present an overoptimistic vision of the society, in which racial thinking has already been substituted with post-racial categories. In such novels, Upstone writes, "realism becomes the form of not the present, but of the 'future possible': it defines Britain not as it is, or was, but *how it might be.* For this reason, such texts can be seen to employ not simply a realist intervention, but what might also be called a *utopian* realist intervention" (Upstone 2016: 5).

so-called "cultural citizenship", defined by Joke Hermes as "the process of bonding and community building, and reflection on that bonding, that is implied in partaking of the text-related practices of reading, consuming, celebrating, and criticizing offered in the realm of (popular) culture" (Hermes 2005: 10). The major difference between the *Frankie and June say... thanks Tim* sequence and *Rivers of London* lies in the depth in which they represent conviviality. While the former does not go beyond presenting it as a form of "happy togetherness", the latter is much closer to Gilroy's conceptualisation of the term. Demonstrating that conviviality and postimperial melancholia co-exist in contemporary Britain, Aaronovitch refuses to "[feed] the illusion that Britain has been or can be disconnected from its imperial past" (Gilroy 2004: 2). To achieve this goal, he combines the formula of urban fantasy with the elements of the police novel to explore the experiences of living in multiculture, which is not devoid of tension and friction yet remains powerfully reaffirmed in the end.

Urban Fantasy and Crime Fiction

The *Rivers of London* cycle fits a broad category of urban fantasy, usually defined as "texts where fantasy and the mundane world intersect and interweave throughout a tale" (Clute 1997: 975), in which a city, whether belonging to the primary or secondary world, is portrayed as a real and complex environment rather than a background to the story (Clute 1997: 975, Irvine 2012: 200).[5] Aaronovitch's contemporary

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[5] The term urban fantasy was first applied in the last two decades of the twentieth century to a group of texts, including Emma Bull's *War for the Oaks* (1987) and Mark Helprin's *Winter's Tale* (1983), which mixed the tropes of heroic fantasy with urban settings. Urban fantasy frequently transforms the elements taken from folklore, fairy-tale, or epic fantasy to fit urban settings and make them not only a background for the protagonist's quest, but also a specific arena of the fight between good and evil (cf. Stableford 2005: 413, Irvine 2012: 200-201). Such understanding of urban fantasy permeates the works of Charles de Lint, one of the pioneers of the genre and a prolific writer, whose novels, set either in contemporary Ottawa or in fictional Newford, draw upon local and European folklore and combine the real world with the "otherworld", the natural with the supernatural. However, the term quickly started to denote virtually any work of the fantastic that takes place in a city, which makes it a very absorbent genre and a broad marketing label. Nowadays, it can be applied to such different

London is indeed depicted with scrupulous attention to detail. The fantastic is deeply immersed in the city's topography, architecture and history, and each novel (apart from *Foxglove Summer*, which is set in the countryside) depicts a different district of London. The cycle can also be read as "intrusion fantasy", in which the world of the narrative is "ruptured by the intrusion, which disrupts normality" (Mendlesohn 2008: 115). In this case, the intrusion is construed as a crime committed with the use of magic and/or by a supernatural creature, and as such needs to be solved by a police investigator with some magic skills. There is, however, surprisingly little tension arising from the approach of the fantastic; its arrival is sudden and comes without any warning to the protagonist-narrator:

> […] at just after five o'clock, it all ground to a halt. The body was gone, the detectives had left and the forensic people unanimously agreed there was nothing more that could be done until dawn – which was three hours away. Until then, they just needed a couple of mugs to guard the crime scene until shift change.
>   Which is how I came to be standing around Covent Garden in a freezing wind at six o'clock in the morning, and why it was me that met the ghost. (Aaronovitch 2011a: 3)

Such an unexpected intrusion combined with autodiegetic narration from the point of view of the detective has a few important effects on the readers' reception of the story. First, it forces them to adopt the perspective of the protagonist, Peter Grant, and together with him solve the criminal case and learn more about the nature of the supernatural. Second, it shows him as an ordinary London police officer, whose encounter with the ghost is incidental, not predestined in any way, and consequently magic is truly egalitarian and available to anyone who

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texts as China Miéville's *Perdido Street Station*, which takes the city as its setting but incorporates the elements typical of New Weird and steampunk fiction, and Laurell K. Hamilton's *Anita Blake: Vampire Hunter* paranormal romance series, which includes the tropes of crime-solving but also focuses on the heroine's romantic and sexual relationships with supernatural creatures. Thus, whereas the works categorized as urban fantasy may considerably differ from one another and are difficult to define precisely, they can be characterized by the presence of the city in which supernatural events happen, a set of characters such as artists, scholars or detectives, and openness towards incorporating elements of other genres (both mimetic and non-mimetic).

wants to practice it. Thirdly, it implies that the fantastic is just a part of ordinary reality, something that is natural, but simply overlooked, ignored or marginalised by most people.

Like other urban fantasy novels, Aaronovitch's cycle is designed "to produce a strong focus on that which in some sense or other is not seen: the Unseen" (Ekman 2016: 463). This emphasis on the fantastic as something hidden or concealed is identified by Stefan Ekman as an organizing principle of the genre in its multiple variations. According to him, there are three major (and sometimes overlapping) ways in which urban fantasy engages with the Unseen. The first approach relies on juxtaposing modern urbanity with the fantastic that is known or revealed only to a few chosen characters, while the mainstream society is unaware of its existence. The second strategy is to combine elements of the Gothic tradition and urban settings to create an atmosphere of concealment and obscurity, implying that the supernatural—very often manifesting itself as creatures such as vampires and werewolves—is not only hidden but actively hiding from public view. The third one construes the fantastic as ignored rather than concealed, and features protagonists (e.g. artists, musicians, writers, journalists, investigators) who belong to or have access to marginalized social groups (Ekman 2016: 463-465). Ekman further links the Unseen in urban fantasy with "a social Other" related to "the less savory aspects of modern/urban life: criminality, homelessness, addiction, prostitution, and physical and sexual abuse [that] are rife in urban fantasy, either at the centre of the story or as prominent parts of its milieu" (Ekman 2016: 466). Young's discussion of the sub-urban in fantasy adds another dimension to the ways the Unseen can be understood. As she argues, the supernatural might come from the underground in a literal sense, but it may also be "a product of the history of a place", which allows "the suppressed history of modernity" to "resurface" (Young 2016: 141-142).

The criminal elements introduced to *Rivers of London* make the cycle even more successful in exposing problems related to living in a contemporary cosmopolitan city. As Ekman argues elsewhere, "one of crime fiction's important contributions to urban fantasy is to reinforce the commentary on social concerns" (Ekman 2017: 48). Aaronovitch's choice to draw from the procedural police novel rather than from hard-boiled fiction allows him to focus on the police detective who operates by the rules of a larger state apparatus and simultaneously to examine

these principles.[6] Peter Messent distinguishes between two major types of police novels: one that "straightforwardly endorses the existing social order" and one that "shows a greater awareness of the pressures, stress points and failings of the social system it represents" (Messent 2010: 185). While both forms deal with the efforts of police officers to enforce law and offer insight into procedural and forensic aspects of their work, the latter one frequently relies on the use of individual detectives who enjoy a degree of autonomy and "look to modify some of that system's abuses and injustices" (Messent 2010: 185). In the *Rivers of London* series this independence from the Metropolitan Police is given to Peter Grant, who together with his superior, Thomas Nightingale, belongs to a special unit dealing solely with crimes and disturbances of a supernatural nature. This basic contrast between the police officers who deal with the Unseen and those who remain ignorant of its existence is further complicated by the juxtaposition of the approaches towards the fantastic represented by Grant and Nightingale. As the supernatural inhabitants of London are construed as minority groups that function outside or on the margins of the official system, various attitudes towards them can be examined as a representation of racial and social issues that are often ignored in fantasy fiction.[7]

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[6] Popular examples that combine elements of urban fantasy and hard-boiled detective fiction inlcude Jim Butcher's *The Dresden Files* and Kim Harrison's *Hollows*. What connects these narratives despite different gender of the protagonists among other differences is the first-person naration (also adopted by Aaronovitch) and "the portrayal of a world gone wrong, in which the detective needs to be hard-boiled, autonomous, and a person of integrity" (Ekman 2017: 52). Aaronovitch's novels also reveal the problems of a "world gone wrong", yet the protagonist is presented as sensitive rather than hard-boiled and acts to modify the existent structures rather than oppose them.

[7] In "Crime Stories and Urban Fantasy" Ekman examines another notable example of the combination of urban fantasy and police novel—Terry Pratchett's *Feet of Clay*, which belongs to the City Watch cycle. In contrast to Aaronovitch's series, which relies on the perspective of the protagonist, Pratchett's novel features a variety of points of view. Yet, despite this difference, *Feet of Clay* also examines the issues related to race, gender, and social inequality (Ekman 2017: 54-56).

Multicultural Present and White Past: Peter Grant and Thomas Nightingale

One of the most important elements for the discussion of the representation of diversity in *Rivers of London* is a unique construction of the protagonist, whose perspective orients the whole narrative. Portraying Peter Grant as a person of mixed race, Aaronovitch takes a step towards discarding the paradigm of whiteness, which has long functioned as a "default setting for Fantasy worlds" according to Helen Young (2016: 58). This resulted from the genre's historic development, most of its "fathers" being English or American white men—H.P. Lovecraft, Robert E. Howard, J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis. Unsurprisingly then, as Young further argues, "race-based ideologies behind the social systems which privileged them as White men very strongly influenced the shape of the worlds they imagined, worlds which were decidedly eurocentric and reproduced White race-thinking that had justified both British imperialism and slavery in the US since at least the eighteenth century" (Young 2016: 16). Drawing their inspiration from European mythology, literature and culture, the founders of fantasy populated their secondary worlds with white protagonists only. As the genre developed in the second half of the twentieth century, some prominent authors—Samuel R. Delany, Charles R. Saunders, Ursula K. Le Guin and Octavia E. Butler, to mention just a few names—introduced protagonists of colour and created worlds that were less Eurocentric in their construction. Recent years have seen the growing popularity of non-western oriented fantasy narratives peopled with non-white characters, written by both writers of colour and white novelists. However, this current trend is not always meant to offer the kind of in-depth commentary on racial issues that is present in the works of Delany, Saunders, Le Guin and Butler. As Young rightly notes, "[t]he presence of people of colour in a genre-culture space does not in and of itself work to change its habits of Whiteness when they do not have agency" (Young 2016: 156). If they are used instrumentally, just to add some variation to the setting, the outcome might be counterproductive—resulting in cultural appropriation and perpetuating rather than breaking racial and ethnic stereotypes (cf. hooks 2013: 21-22).

The construction of Peter Grant poses no such risk. He is the son of a drug-addicted white Scottish jazzman and a cleaning lady who came from Sierra Leone, which makes him not only mixed-race but also rooted

in and shaped by two cultures—British and West-African. Both his lower class and ethnic origins are constantly made visible in the cycle, as in this description of the family dinner:

> Mum came in with dinner. We were always a two-pot family, one for Mum and a considerably less spicy pot for Dad. He also likes slices of white bread and marge rather than rice […]. I was a two-pot child, both rice and white bread, which explains my chiseled good looks and manly physique.
>   Mum's pot was cassava leaf, while Dad had lamb casserole. I opted for the lamb that evening because I've never liked cassava leaf, especially when Mum drowns it in palm oil. She uses so much pepper that her soup turns red and I swear it's only a matter of time before one of her dinner guests spontaneously combusts. (Aaronovitch 2011b: 45)

In the passage the protagonist refers to himself as a "two-pot child", who sees both culinary traditions, i.e. more and less spicy food, African rice and English bread, as equally natural and familiar. He can choose what he prefers at the moment, both dishes being easily available. These two cuisines metaphorically reflect the duality in which he was growing up, his "two-potness" becoming a powerful symbol of his bicultural identity, explained elsewhere in the following terms:

> Bicultural individuals are typically described as people who have internalized two cultures to the extent that both cultures are alive inside of them. Many bicultural individuals report that the two internalized cultures take turns in guiding their thoughts and feelings. (Hong et al 2000: 710)

The construction of the protagonist furthermore corresponds with the notion of "blended biculturals"—the term denoting individuals who "construe their two identities as compatible and overlapping" (Wiley and Deaux 2011: 50). In Aaronovitch's cycle, Peter Grant's mixed heritage is not a source of psychological inner conflict or confusion. Generally, the protagonist accepts both cultures as something that has made him, choosing the elements that suit him and ignoring the others, like in the case of this particular meal when he goes for the lamb casserole rather than cassava leaf. As the plot unfolds, it also becomes evident that he can foreground or play down certain aspects of his identity depending on the situation and the audience to achieve his aims, which accords with Shaun Wiley and Kay Deaux's observations that "the performance of bicultural identities varies within individuals and across situations, depending on

visibility to different audiences and personal orientation toward membership groups" (Wiley and Deaux 2011: 64).

As for his mixed-race heritage, it might cause more problems because the system of social organization still needs and relies on racial labels. For instance, in the police jargon there is a special code for white citizens—IC1, and a different one for black ones—IC3, Peter himself tending to "jump between" IC3 or IC6—Arabic or North African—depending on how much sun he "[has] caught recently" (Aaronovitch 2011a: 96). Such codes, even if used in police communication for the sake of brevity and not discrimination, indicate that our perception of individuals is still determined by racial thinking and stands no chance of accounting for the complexity of human identity. The shade of one's skin signals a set of meanings, stereotypes and associations. Unlike clothes, for instance, it becomes a code over which the person has no control:

> I was sending out mixed signals, the suit and reassuring countenance of my face going one way, the fact that I'd obviously been in a fight recently and was mixed race going the other. It's a myth that Londoners are oblivious to one another on the tube: we're hyper-aware of each other and are constantly revising our what-if scenarios and counter strategies. What if that suavely handsome yet ethnic young man asks me for money? Do I give or refuse? If he makes a joke do I respond, and if so will it be a shy smile or a guffaw? If he's been hurt in a fight does he need help? If I help him will I find myself drawn into a threatening situation, or an adventure, or a wild interracial romance? Will I miss supper? If he opens his jacket and yells 'God is great', will I make it down the other end of the carriage in time? (Aaronovitch 2011a: 244)

The passage indicates that Peter is well aware of the fact that he is sending "mixed signals", which the other passengers are constantly decoding, interpreting, and using to devise scenarios of potential courses of action. Peter's experience on the tube mirrors the experiences of living in a multicultural society, where the possible scripts of reacting to difference might be shaped by both positive ("adventure", "wild interracial romance") and negative ("threatening situation", terrorism) connotations. And yet, the protagonist seems neither offended nor angered by the fact that his blackness is immediately noticed and automatically codified. On the contrary, he emphasizes he belongs to the group by using the pronoun "we". He is predominantly a Londoner, and "we, Londoners" are diverse, each one different, yet employing the same strategies of dealing with reality.

These hypothetical scenarios are not finally enacted, but their very existence in the passengers' imagination implies that "conviviality cannot be seen only through those instances where multi-ethnic interaction is fluent, but must also be considered by how it becomes pertinent to invocations of ethnically construed suspicion" (Valluvan 2016: 11-12). Such suspicion is indirectly yet powerfully revealed through the attitudes of humans towards the fantastic inhabitants of the metropolis. The latter can be read as supernatural "others" whose divergence from the majority is more pronounced than any other form of difference, be it ethnic, social or cultural. These different levels of otherness in the cycle are not really set in opposition to each other, but engage in a mutual dialogue, influencing and being influenced by each other, diversity becoming the most important trait of the city's identity.

Peter Grant's ethnic and social background and upbringing make him prone to perceive the supernatural Other as something natural, which is not the case for his superior and mentor, Thomas Nightingale. Depicted as a white gentleman with first-class style and impeccable accent, he looks forty but turns out to be born around 1900. Unlike Grant, Nightingale is a product of the British colonial and imperial past, functioning in a contemporary society and learning to adapt but simultaneously cherishing his memories of bygone days:

> 'The world was different before the war,' he said. 'We didn't have this instantaneous access to information that your generation has. The world was a bigger, more mysterious place – we still dreamed of secret caves in the Mountains of the Moon, and tiger-hunting in the Punjab.' (Aaronovitch 2011b: 112)

This nostalgic longing for the past, a clear instance of postimperial melancholia, is immediately juxtaposed with Peter's sober observation— "When all the map was pink […]. When every boy expected his own adventure and girls had not yet been invented" (Aaronovitch 2011b: 112). The comment directs the readers' attention to the social changes that have taken place since then, especially the loss of empire and the emancipation of women, as more important than technological ones. Nightingale's imperialist attitude does not pertain to other people, irrespective of their skin colour or ethnic background, as they are perceived by him as belonging to the same race and treated as equal. However, his racism manifests itself in his perception of non-human supernatural creatures as fascinating and not necessarily evil in

themselves, yet definitely lower in the hierarchy than people, especially magicians. For Nightingale, there is a possibility of peaceful coexistence between humans and fantastic creatures, but only if the latter accept the rules delineated by the former. Initially, the older mage's way of thinking resembles colonial discourse in its emphasis on the binary oppositions of human (understood as the norm and connected with positive qualities) and supernatural (seen as the Other and denoting inferiority, the uncivilized, irrational, riotous, dangerous, etc).[8] Although he is against any form of cruelty towards fantastic creatures, in the beginning of the cycle Nightingale can be interpreted as an embodiment of Edward Said's "White Man". In his discussion Said delineates the "White Man" as both "an idea and a reality" that imposed "a very concrete manner of being-in-the world, a way of taking hold of reality, language, and thought" (Said 1979: 227). As he further argues, in the colonial reality the "White Man" assumed a form of authority over the nonwhites, or in Nightingale's case over the nonhumans, which was augmented by the late nineteenth-century scientific, political and cultural discourses that construed hierarchical classification of races, nations and languages as "radical and ineradicable" (Said 1979: 233).

Interestingly, as the narrative progresses, Nightingale's perception gradually changes under the influence of his apprentice, who increasingly advocates finding place for the fantastic "minorities" within the system on condition that their habits and customs do not involve criminal activity. Nightingale is not immune to Grant's suggestions, which include apparently insignificant modifications of his speech:

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[8] This opposition of human vs. supernatural obviously resembles the binary oppositions typical for colonial and imperial discourse and the processes of the marginalization and othering of the colonized. While the scope of this article does not allow for a detailed discussion of the phenomenon, the practice was universal, which is observed, for instance, by Ania Loomba: "Despite the enormous differences between the colonial enterprises of various European nations, they seem to generate fairly similar stereotypes of 'outsiders'—both those outsiders who roamed far away on the edges of the world, and those who (like the Irish) lurked uncomfortably nearer home. Thus laziness, aggression, violence, greed, sexual promiscuity, bestiality, primitivism, innocence and irrationality are attributed (often contradictorily and inconsistently by the English, French, Dutch, Spanish and Portugese colonists) to Turks, Africans, Native Americans, Jews, Indians, the Irish, and others" (1998: 107).

'You can't call them black magicians,' I said.
'You realize that we're using "black" in its metaphorical sense here,' said Nightingale.
'It doesn't matter,' I said. 'Words change what they mean, don't they? Some people would call me a black magician.'
[…]
'What should we call them?' he asked patiently.
'Ethically challenged magical practitioners,' I said. (Aaronovitch 2011b: 113)

While Nightingale's insensitivity might be unintentional, the conflation of "black" with "evil" mirrors the value-laden premises of the colonial and imperial discourse. On the other hand, Peter's insistence on finding a new expression devoid of this evaluative meaning demonstrates his awareness of the persistence of the negative stereotyping in language. As much harm was perpetuated through discourse, the only logical step, even if evoking some resistance at first, is to modify it.

Nightingale's insensitivity, stemming from his privileged position as a white man, also underlies another problem related to representation—the fact that whiteness is usually perceived as "non-raced", which is "evident in the absence of reference to whiteness in the habitual speech and writing of white people in the West" (Dyer 2000: 540). In Aaronovitch's narrative oriented through the perspective of a mixed-race individual, white ethnicity is constantly made visible in casual descriptions, for instance: "an ordinary looking white man" (Aaronovitch 2014 a: 31), "a skinny young boy with damp brown hair and a big mouth in a thin face" (Aaronovitch 2014 a: 124), "a formidable white woman … [d]ressed in an M&S blouse and Peacock budget slacks" (Aaronovitch 2014a: 173). Through this descriptive strategy whiteness becomes as evident as any other ethnicity, one of many rather than the privileged one, which is another strategy employed in the cycle to break the habits of Whiteness.

The Spirit of London: Mother Thames and Father Thames
If we can read Peter Grant as an embodiment of the "multicultural present" and Thomas Nightingale as a metaphor for the "white past" (cf. Littler and Naidoo), these two attitudes are combined in the identity of the city itself, which is to a great extent determined by its *genii loci*, i.e. the protective spirits of the river Thames, personified as Mother Thames and Father Thames. In *The Fairies in Tradition and Literature,* Katherine

Briggs observes that water spirits are the commonest of all nature spirits in the folklore of the British Islands (Briggs 2002: 50). And yet the construction of two river guardians in the cycle is not derived from traditional folk tales, but carefully designed to reflect London's diversity, which is another attempt at challenging the white-centric patterns of fantasy.

Mother Thames, Aaronovitch's unique creation, is a Nigerian woman, who came to London in 1957 as a "stupid country girl with a name that [she] has forgotten" (Aaronovitch 2011a: 112), which emphasizes her connection with the metropolis rather than her motherland. Her beginnings in London are a clichéd story of an immigrant girl who was expelled from a nursing school into the street and left heartbroken by her lover. Attempting to commit suicide by throwing herself down from London Bridge, she received an offer she could not resist—to give her own life to the river, and by that become the guardian spirit of not only the Thames, but also of London, which "was still a port back then, dying but like an old man with a long exciting life, full of stories and memories. And terrified that he was going to be old and frail with no one to look after him" (Aaronovitch 2011a: 114).

Mother Thames, with her Nigerian roots, personifies the energy of the newcomers that gave the city a new life, making it a vibrant multicultural metropolis, bustling with life, music, colours and smells. She is constantly depicted as an African queen, a voluptuous yet regal woman:

> She sat enthroned on the finest of the executive armchairs. Her hair was braided and threaded with black cotton and tipped with gold, so that it stood above her brow like a crown. […] Her blouse and wrap skirt were made from the finest gold Austrian lace, the neckline picked out in silver and scarlet, wide enough to display one smooth plump shoulder and the generous upper slopes of her breasts. (Aaronovitch 2011a: 109-110)[9]

In contrast, her supernatural aura evokes associations with the port—"the smell of salt water and coffee, diesel and bananas, chocolate and fish

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[9] While the descriptions of Mother Thames might imply an act of exoticising her as the Other, it is more likely that Aaronovitch aims to challenge the aesthetics associated with white royalty by introducing elements of African fashion (braided hair, gold lace wrap skirt, vivid colours) as an alternative vision of luxury and power.

guts" (Aaronovitch 2011a: 110), which directs attention to the historic relevance of the colonies for the development of London. As the goddess of the tideway mixing fresh waters from England and seawater from abroad, she symbolically stands for the fusion of indigenous Britishness and foreignness that have become a characteristic feature of the cosmopolitan capital. Consequently, Mama Thames represents a postcolonial, post-imperial London and a two-way exchange going on between the old dwellers of the city and its new immigrant inhabitants (Young 2016: 154).

The literary and visual representation of Father Thames has a much longer tradition, one of the first references appearing in Alexander Pope's poem of 1713, "Windsor Forest". Aaronovitch reimagines him as a representative of the old, colonial or even earlier feudal order. He is centuries older than Mother Thames, his human incarnation being Tiberius Claudius Verica, the Romano-British official from the times when the settlement of Londinium was established. It is significant that Father Thames left London in the times of the Great Stink (1858), when the pollution and resulting stench of the river had become so unbearable that it was finally decided to build a proper sewage system. The process "killed" his three sons, Tyburn, Fleet, and Effra, who are "reborn" in the cycle as Mama Thames's daughters and significantly contribute to the plot. And yet Father Thames, who deserted fast-changing London during the Victorian industrial revolution, remains powerful and influential beyond the boundaries of the metropolis—in the countryside that symbolizes old, green, Merry England. His aura is clearly connected with this vision, as it evokes "beer and skittles […], the smell of horse manure and walking home from the pub by moonlight, a warm fireside and uncomplicated women" (Aaronovitch 2011a: 180).

The two-fold construction of the river, with its two different *genii loci*, whose sphere of influence is "divided along rural/urban boundaries" (Young 2016: 154), may refer to Britain as well. Initially, it appears that the influence of Mother Thames, ruling over the capital, is much stronger, and consequently more important for the culture of contemporary Britain. It turns out, however, that both deities hold real power, even if their source is different: "They both have genuine power,' […] 'But it feels different. Hers is definitely from the sea, from the port and all that. His is all from the earth and the weather and leprechauns and crystals, for all I know'" (Aaronovitch 2011a: 188). The sea and the port

assigned to Mother Thames represent the influx of immigrants and their cultures; the earth, the weather and leprechauns linked with Father Thames stand for the land, indigenous people and local folklore. The goddess and the god respectively represent modernity and tradition, today and history, femininity and masculinity, but the construction of the plot of the first novel in the series emphasizes that both deities contribute to the final victory over the enemy. To keep the adversary at bay, the deities warring over their sphere of influence need to reach a truce. The solution is naturally brought about by Peter, who as a person of mixed heritage is particularly suited for negotiating the difference. To achieve his aims, he proposes "the exchange of hostages […] to cement ties between the two halves of the river" (Aaronovitch 2011a: 387). Construed as a feudal-like symbolic ceremony, the exchange is actually meant as a certain platform that facilitates better knowledge of each other. More knowledge will hopefully lead Mother and Father Thames to accept that the triumph is possible only when the values represented by both of them, i.e. the native inhabitants of the island and the immigrants, are accepted and seen as diverse but equally important for the socio-cultural system.

The Fantastic Multiculture and Super-Diversity
As mentioned briefly in the Introduction, Aaronovitch's London bears some similarity to the vision of the city projected in the Opening Ceremony of the Olympic Games. It is depicted as a melting pot of nationalities, cultures and religions, with considerable emphasis placed on social, class and sexual heterogeneity as well. The novels are peopled with a whole range of characters of diverse backgrounds and identities, including, for instance, Dr Abdul Haqq Walida, a cryptopathologist of Muslim origin, speaking with a strong Scottish accent and deeply interested in the damage inflicted by doing magic on the human brain; Miriam Stephanopolous, the terrifying lesbian commander of a special force police squad, who turns out to be less terrifying after all; Sahra Guleed, a young woman of Somali origin performing her duties in this squad wearing a *hijab*; Leslie May, Peter's white female work colleague from Essex, who epitomizes nearly stereotypical "Englishness". In the background of Aaronovitch's novels there are also countless Hindus, Kurds, Poles, Romanians and other immigrants, encountered in shops,

bars, streets, everywhere in fact. Aaronovitch's London is reminiscent of the vision of the city from *London Biography*, where Peter Ackroyd observes:

> London has always been a city of immigrants. […] It has often been remarked that, in other cities, many years must pass before a foreigner is accepted; in London, it takes as many months. It is true, too, that you can only be happy in London if you begin to consider yourself as a Londoner. It is the secret of successful assimilation.
>
> (Ackroyd 2003: chapter 73, n.pag.)

Ackroyd further notes that all newcomers, no matter when and where they came from, had to build their new London identity without, however, losing their original heritage in the process. When situated within this context, Aaronovitch's *Rivers of London* cycle offers an insight into what it means to be a "true Londoner", functioning on a daily basis in a zone where various tendencies and cultures mix, this diversity being carefully depicted not only at the realistic level concerned with the representation of human characters, but also within the sphere of the fantastic.

Consequently, the novels depict London as a truly multicultural metropolis, inhabited not only by representatives of various racial, ethnic, cultural and sexual minorities, but also by its *genii loci,* ghosts, vampires, dwarves, and other fantastic creatures of different origins. Such a construction of the city seems to further enhance its image as a site of diversity, or indeed "super-diversity". The idea of super-diversity refers not only to the increasing number of immigrant and ethnic minorities, but also to the complexity and diversification within these groups. Far from being monolithic, they are characterized by a dynamic interplay of variables, including not only ethnicity, language, religious and cultural identity, but also gender, legal status, educational background, access to employment, attitude to the country of their origin, etc (cf. Vertovec 1029-1044).

Aaronovitch's insistence on super-diversity can be exemplified by his depiction of the goddesses of the Thames. While all of them, with the exception of Lea, are black females, they do not form a unified group or represent the same type of black femininity, but are characterized as women with different social backgrounds and lifestyles. For instance, Peter's love interest, Beverly Brooks, is a physically attractive, confident and easygoing woman in her twenties, whose magical aura evokes

associations with intimacy rather than overt sexuality—"cocoa butter and rainwater, […] snogging on the sofa […] and Tracy Chapman singing "Fast Car" on your parents' stereo" (Aaronovitch 2014a: 128). In contrast, her sister, Lady Ty (Tyburn), inspires little, if any, associations with such a laid-back and intimate atmosphere. Holding two degrees from Oxford and living in Mayfair, she is manipulative, power-hungry and influential in London's political circles, her aura reflecting her high social standing through connotations with "cigars and new car seats, horses and furniture polish, Stilton, Belgian chocolate" (Aaronovitch 2011a: 237). Other black female characters include the voluptuous yet regal Mother Thames, Fleet—a sensible mother of two girls who works on Radio Four and lives in North London; Effra—an eccentric type with silver and blue hair extensions and a BA in the History of Art dwelling in Brixton, and Peter's own mother surrounded by an extensive network of friends and relatives, who make up "at least twenty per cent of the expatriate Sierra Leonean community currently resident in the UK" (Aaronovitch 2012: 3). Most rounded of them all is Abigail, whose prominence for the cycle is increasing from the third novel onwards. She is an independent and nosy mixed-race teenager from Peter's neighbourhood, who excels in Latin, demonstrates expertise in the newest technologies and computer systems and begins to learn magic as well. Even if not all black women in the cycle are multi-dimensional characters, the sheer variety of different types allows Aaronovitch to outline a super-diversified black community, made up of individuals who differ in terms of social status, lifestyle and interests. This strategy contributes to his preoccupation with challenging the paradigm of whiteness by questioning the stereotypical representation of black females in popular culture, where they have long been depicted as domestic nurturers (the "Mammy"), over-sexualized and promiscuous women ("Jezebel"), or angry black women ("Sapphire") (Harris and Goldman 2014: 3-6). Here, they are more individualized and given agency over the events, which allows them to exert influence over their own lives as well as to shape the identity of the city.

Another interesting aspect of the cycle is that in the non-fantastic London the problems or difficulties related to living in multiculture are barely noticed. Diversity, as we have observed, is depicted with a high degree of realism. Racial, ethnic, religious and sexual difference is made visible yet treated as a natural component of urban life. Life in

Aaronovitch's London is generally characterized by conviviality and "commonplace diversity", which implies that diversity is perceived as something positive and commonplace as long as people adhere to "the ethos of mixing", defined as "the expectation that in public and associational spaces, people 'should mix' and interact with their fellow residents of other backgrounds" (Wessendorf 2013: 407-408). In the *Rivers of London* series the "ethos of mixing" does not always pertain to the private sphere, yet it allows Londoners to live together without bigger conflicts, which appear only incidentally and usually in connection with the intrusion of the fantastic/criminal element. More problematic issues are made *seen*, however, through the adoption of the urban fantasy formula, which allows Aaronovitch to examine the attitudes towards racial difference by focusing on the reactions towards the fantastic species. Although the realistic and the fantastic are interwoven in the story, the fae, demi-fae and other creatures are portrayed as the supernatural Other, defined by their difference from mainstream society. London's inclusivity does not pertain to its fantastic population, whose representatives are still excluded from the official system, marginalized, and sometimes even persecuted. Thus, *Rivers of London* reveals some problems of the multicultural community by transposing the racialized perception of the Other from human onto non-human citizens.

The attitudes towards the fantastic Other represented in the cycle differ. Most police officers are slightly annoyed when the cases related to "weird stuff" or "weird bollocks" appear, as the supernatural intrusions pose a challenge to police procedures and cannot be explained rationally. This highlights the problems that result from lack of contact between the two spheres and demonstrates that the strategy of pretending that the fantastic does not exist brings no solutions at all. Another attitude is represented by Nightingale, for whom "Fae is just a term like foreigner or barbarian, it basically means people that are not entirely human" (Aaronovitch 2012: 148). While he is not fiercely hostile to the supernatural creatures, his perception is tinged with racism inherent to postimperial melancholia. Nightingale's position, however, is presented as unintended, old-fashioned and resulting from his upbringing in the beginning of the twentieth century. It is also subject to gradual changes, which implies the possibility of transforming his views through Peter's efforts. The real antagonist of the story is not Nightingale but the Faceless Man. Apart from being involved in criminal activities, this

powerful magician holds white supremacist views, which are revealed in *The Hanging Tree*, where he states that in contrast to Peter, his white female colleague Leslie is "a proper Brit" defined by him as "[t]hat wonderful blend of Romano-Celt and Anglo-Saxon with a flavouring of Dane and a pinch of Norman French. That happy breed that conquered the world and could again if all their children were kind and natural" (Aaronovitch 2016: 358-9). In contrast to Nightingale, whose nostalgia for the "white past" has a humorous ring to it and appears quite harmless, the Faceless Man's fantasy of the "white future" meant "to 'purify' and rehomogenize the nation" (Gilroy 2004: 111) is depicted as a real threat to the society through connecting the antagonist with crime. Significantly, it is also white, Essex-raised Leslie May with working-class roots who after a terrible accident damaging her face joins the antagonist in an attempt to regain her previous looks. The destruction of Leslie's face might be read as a symbolic loss of identity, which a young woman tries to reclaim and, in consequence, becomes susceptible to white supremacist ideology. In this light, Nightingale's apparently harmless nostalgia, when intensified by the feelings of "resentment, rejection, and fear at the prospect of open interaction with an otherness, […] imagined as loss and jeopardy" (Gilroy 2004: 111), may lead to the perpetuation of the cycles of violence, if it is not properly and timely addressed.

The approach of Peter Grant towards the otherness of fantastic creatures seems to be a model response to multicultural diversity favoured by the cycle. The fact that he is mixed-race and bicultural makes the protagonist curious yet open-minded and respectful towards the supernatural Other. His openness and non-judgmental attitude is manifest in his inclusive description of the demi-monde as "all the people involved in some way or the other with weird bollocks […]. Some of them are just people that know things and others are people who are a bit strange in themselves" (Aaronovitch 2016: 78). Through this definition, Grant emphasizes the similitude of the supernatural inhabitants of London to ordinary people, presenting the touch of magic as just an extra trait of their humanity. Such approach stands in vivid contrast to the one represented by Nightingale, who focuses on the difference, the deviation from the norm and the lack of something ("not entirely human"). Living on the fringes of respectable society and sometimes disregarding its rules, the fae are seen by Peter as both

potentially dangerous and alluringly diverse, but neither inherently good nor bad by their very nature. Furthermore, Peter's developing intimate bond with Beverley Brooks, the river goddess, seems to demonstrate that "interracial" relationships between humans and non-humans are possible and, in fact, not less acceptable than the marriage of his own parents. Throughout the narrative Peter is also shown as actively seeking and desiring contact with the Other, which, as hooks argues, "can act as a critical intervention challenging and subverting racist domination, inviting and enabling critical resistance" (hooks 2013: 22). Such a critical intervention seems to be of crucial importance to the author of the cycle, who, despite being white himself, handles the problems of race and ethnicity with sensitivity, allowing him to overcome the habits of whiteness of fantasy fiction.

Conclusion

The most potent question that lingers on reading Aaronovitch's novels is whether it is possible to peacefully incorporate the demi-monde—a metaphor for all sorts of minority—into the system so that their needs and values are respected. What if the 'minority culture' threatens peace and order? How can vampires, whose practices allow them to kill humans, be included within the society? What is to be done with carnivorous unicorns kidnapping children? How can the groups that prefer not to mingle with the rest of the society and remain hidden be protected from being exploited by powerful magicians who want to use them for their own ends? Although the novels do not offer ready made solutions, they add one more voice to the discussion on the British multicultural present and provide a potent comment on contemporary reality.

Aaronovitch's choice of combining urban fantasy with elements of the police novel allows him to unveil, or in Ekman's nomenclature make seen, the instances of racial stereotyping and prejudice in social practices, mental constructs, and everyday language. This is, however, achieved through examining the attitudes towards the supernatural Other, which makes the problem appear more abstract and, consequently, easier to approach without any preconceptions. The representatives of the fantastic demi-monde can be good or evil, good-natured or malicious, law-abiding or criminal, eager or reluctant to cooperate. Consequently,

the fantastic stratum of the world in Aaronovitch's novels is not a mythical arena of the fight between the forces of light and darkness, or the human and the supernatural, but rather a zone of cultural tension and friction, which creates both opportunities and threats. Representing various approaches to diversity—ranging from white supremacist views (Faceless Man) through postimperial melancholia (Thomas Nightingale) to conviviality and the ethos of mixing (Peter Grant)—*Rivers of London* is straightforwardly pro-difference in its insistence on adopting the perspective of the mixed-race protagonist, which is achieved through the employment of the first-person narrative voice.

Constantly developing the motifs sketched here, Aaronovitch demonstrates that urban fantasy has a huge potential for breaking the habits of whiteness and exploring the themes that feature less prominently, if at all, in epic or high fantasy. The novels discard the white-centric paradigm not only by the construction of the protagonist, but also by other means. The first of them is the introduction of two protective spirits of the Thames, one representing its white past, the other the arrival of immigrants, as equally important to the identity of the city. Another one is a successful attempt at representing a diversified black community by delineating various non-stereotypical black female characters. Furthermore, at different levels of the story and often in a humorous manner, Aaronovitch deconstructs the remains of colonial and imperial discourse that conflates "black" with negative associations and valorizes "white" as positive. Finally, the apparent "happy-togetherness" of Londoners occupying the realistic level of the narrative is juxtaposed with their inability to accept the city's supernatural inhabitants, who remain largely Unseen. Yet, as the narrative progresses and the supernatural/criminal activity increases in scope, the humans and the fae are driven to co-operate to face the antagonist, who threatens both of them. In the process, they need to find a platform for mutual understanding that would enhance their collaboration and facilitate necessary compromises. While this is not an easy task, the *Rivers of London* cycle offers a hopeful message that despite the existence of postimperial melancholia, which unfortunately may take more extreme forms, conviviality may help to develop interactional practices by which racial and ethnic conflicts could be successfully negotiated.

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