

Constructing Ethnic Minority Detectives in French and German Crime Television Series

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This article examines and compares the representation of ethnic minority lead investigators in the television crime series, *Tatort Hamburg* (ARD, 2008-2012 season), *Cherif* (France 2, 2013-2019), *Last Panthers* (Canal+, 2015), and *Dogs of Berlin* (Netflix, 2018). It suggests a typology of the figure of the ethnic minority detective based on representational patterns shared by the series and other literary and television narratives, which is discussed and contextualized within the ideological and commercial limitations of French and German television cultures. The last section assesses the series' potential to depict 'postmigrant societies' founded on and influenced by social plurality and former and ongoing migration movements. In so doing, the study highlights role of typologies and narrative tropes in the portrayal of ethnic minorities in crime television and insists, despite the shortcomings of some series' representational strategies, on the value of figures of identification for minority and majority audiences that attest to a shifting understanding of 'us' and 'others' in contemporary European societies.

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INTRODUCTION¹

In 2011 it was estimated that racialized minorities born in Europe roughly number ten million people, a figure that marks every single EU nation's experience and imagination.² Yet, for the last three decades, media scholars have stressed that compared to white Europeans, ethnic minorities and immigrants are largely underrepresented in television.³ One genre that arguably escapes this rule is crime fiction, which traditionally incorporates and foregrounds the social margins, immigrants, the disenfranchised, and the post-industrial blight.^{4 5} Indeed, as early as in the 1970s and 1980s, crime series like *Tatort* (1970-) in Germany or *Série noire* (1984-1991) in France featured ethnic minority characters, a trend that continues to this day. Their inclusion, however, is not exempted from representational issues, and must be analysed critically to study ways in which European crime narratives react to and reflect upon cultural diversity.

Literature scholars such as Stephen Soitos or Axel Stähler have suggested the existence of 'ethnic crime fiction' as a subgenre that focuses



on questions of race and ethnicity.^{6 7} Exploring ethnic crime novels by both authors of colour and white authors, Stähler argues that by centring their plots on experiences of marginalized subjects, they offer a subversive space that challenges the political, social, and cultural hegemonies.⁸ Scholarship focusing on racialized minorities in European crime fiction is sporadic and tends to discuss it in relation to other minority literary traditions. Stephen Knight, for example, analyses Mike Philips's British black detective, Sam Dean, as a local figure dealing with a wide range of crimes that contrasts the detection in African American crime fiction, which he claims, often centres on racial oppression.⁹ Sylvie Dumerlat's study of Lakhdar Belaid's novels argues for a 'Franco-Maghrebi *noir*' subgenre, which she defines as a hybrid form that combines aspects of the Franco-Maghrebi literary tradition (such as auto-ethnographic practices, multilingualism, historical rewriting, and peri-urban spaces) with conventions of the French *noir* genre.¹⁰

Television research largely avoids the ethnic crime fiction label and focuses instead on investigating the representation of minority characters in crime series. The few North American studies explicitly addressing television 'ethnic detectives' describe them as 'native informants'¹¹ who explore cultural differences and make links between minority and mainstream cultures.¹² French media studies mentioning detectives of colour tend to centre on broad discussions of ethnic diversity in television.¹³ Ginette Vincendeau notes that the crime genre has launched the careers of many black and Maghrebi French actors who are typecast as drug dealers, petty criminals, or gang members.¹⁴ She also points to a gradual shift towards more positive roles since the 1990s but admits that they remain subservient to white heroes.¹⁵ Similar developments in German media have been documented, such as Michelle Mattson's comparative study of 1980s and 1990s *Tatort* seasons, which notices 'remarkable changes' in the representation of ethnic diversity in German society that detach from malicious portrayals of foreigners, but also acknowledges the overrepresentation of foreign criminal figures.¹⁶

Despite the growing and continued presence of characters of colour in global crime fiction, there are only a few studies comparing their representation across cultures. The available comparative research focuses primarily on literary narratives and examines them through a transnational or postcolonial lens. For example, Vera Alexander's analysis of Romesh Gunsekera's *The Sandglass* (1998), which centres on Sri Lankan British characters, considers the novel to be part of 'diasporic literature' because it emphasizes the latency and awareness of sociocultural borders tracing back to the colonial period.¹⁷ Although the concept of diaspora allows to identify historical and transcultural legacies in European literature, it may also separate crime fiction about ethnic minorities from European popular culture, national borders, history, and literary traditions.

The limited engagement of European criticism with discussions on ethnic



crime fiction as a category might be partially explained by contemporary scholarship on European identity and crime literature. According to Kerry Dune, European crime fiction is thought to be concerned with the relation of local and regional identities, mainly as a reaction to globalization and the complex reality of national, regional, and local alliances within the continent.¹⁸ This conception proposes that identity in contemporary Europe is constructed as 'an amalgam of provincial and urban, or local and global characteristics that are deployed and subverted simultaneously.'¹⁹ Studying ethnic crime fiction globally, Monika Mueller and Dorothea Fischer-Hornung suggest that studies on European crime fiction focusing exclusively on race and ethnicity may face limited interpretations. Indeed, they argue that in contrast to the North American situation where ethnicity is primarily associated with skin colour, in Europe, language, regional dialects, or local customs can play a critical and at times more significant role than race.²⁰ This could apply well to Brigitte Roüan's crime telefilm *Le débarcadère des anges* (France 2, 2009), whose black detective, Corbucci, does not face racial discrimination possibly due to his status as a Marseilles local who speaks in the regional accent and whose late father was a local white police officer. Hence, studies of European ethnic minority detectives must also attend to the interactions between race, ethnicity, and other equally potent markers such as social class, regional identity, and history.

By stressing the importance and necessity to study and compare European crime fiction within its own cultural contexts, in this article I examine the representation of ethnic minority lead investigators in the television crime series, *Tatort* Hamburg (ARD, 2008-2012 season), *Cherif* (France 2, 2013-2019), *Last Panthers* (Canal +, 2015), and *Dogs of Berlin* (Netflix, 2018), which feature detectives pertaining to the Maghrebi minority in France and the Turkish minority in Germany. It suggests a typology of the figure of the ethnic minority detective based on representational patterns shared by the series and other literary and television narratives. This intermedial approach aims to demonstrate the strong links between crime television series and literature but I will also contextualize the patterns within the ideological and commercial limitations of French and German television cultures. The last section assesses the series' potential to present postmigrant societies founded on and influenced by social plurality and former and ongoing migration movements.²¹ In so doing, I suggest that comparative studies of French and German ethnic minority detectives can offer powerful insights on how contemporary European television cultures represent difference, diversity, and more broadly, crime and justice.



ETHNIC MINORITY DETECTIVES IN A COLOUR-BLIND CONTINENT?

The selection of the series for comparison is not solely based on their protagonists' ethnic background, but also on their potential to illustrate similarities and differences in the construction of detectives of colour across France and Germany. What is more, the four series inscribe in a trend of 2010s television productions to diversify images of France and Germany at the national and international level. The 2008-2012 *Tatort* Hamburg seasons feature its first regular Turkish German detective in Germany's most popular and influential mainstream crime television series.²² Although the first Franco-Maghrebi television detectives appeared in the 1990s and early 2000s with the young and cool-headed detective, Selim Rey (Kader Boukhanef) of *Le Lyonnais* (Antenne 2/France 2, 1990-1992) and the comic police captain, Mohammed 'Mo' Loumani (Smain) of *Commissaire Bastille* (TF1, 2001-2002), *Cherif* is the longest-running crime series featuring a Franco-Maghrebi protagonist. Moreover, as the series co-creator, Lionel Olenga notes, by the 2010s there was a lack of diversity in French crime television that the series tried to redress:

*We wanted to bring a new type of cop. The profile of a gloomy, introvert, and depressive policeman already existed. We needed a character that we weren't used to see on French TV: the cop of Maghrebi descent [...] This choice allowed us to turn our attention to some clichés, to point at racist attitudes or prejudice without falling into activism or that the series centred there. Our goal was to entertain with a mix of a cool cop and serious investigations.*²³

The series *The Last Panthers* and *Dogs of Berlin*, focusing on an ex-convict Franco-Maghrebi and a queer Turkish German detective respectively, also represent a deliberate departure from classic European crime television series. While it could be objected that none of the series depicts a female protagonist, it is noteworthy that they inscribe in the male focus of the crime genre and highlight the marginalization of ethnic minority women in European television²⁴ who are more than often limited to supporting roles, namely as sisters, co-workers, and mothers.

Although each of the selected series offers a unique story of a European detective belonging to an ethnic minority, they all recount in their own terms a story of a presumed asymmetry between non-white detectives' ethnicity and values of law and order. For example, in the first episode of *Cherif*,²⁵ upon seeing a hooded dark-skinned man breaking into an apartment, the newly transferred white police captain Adeline Briard (Carole Bianic) rapidly arrests him. While taking him towards the detention cells, the police chief informs her that her detainee is, in fact, her new partner, Captain Kader



Cherif (Abdelhafid Metalsi). In a subsequent scene, Cherif admits that the incident was a 'very tempting' prank, to which Adeline, irritated, replies:

Adeline: *'An Arab wearing a hoodie breaking into an apartment through the window, no offense, is rarely a policeman going home, you know?'*

Cherif: *[quietly surprised] 'Oh...I see...'*

Adeline: *'I mean... you know what I mean.'* [emphasis added]

This association of ethnic minorities to crime is also echoed on the first episode of *Tatort* featuring Cenk Batu (Mehmet Kurtuluş).²⁶ While undercover a white Federal officer interrogates him after he tried to catch the attacker of a Turkish German gang ringleader's nephew at the hospital:

Officer: *'He bails out and you follow him down the stairs. Why?'*

Batu: *[chuckling] 'What do you mean, why?'*

Officer: *'I'm wondering, that's all... I mean, you had nothing to do with it. Allegedly.'*

Batu: *'Wait a minute, don't you guys ask for moral courage?'*

Officer: *'That's true. But it's strange, nonetheless ... as soon as you show up here, a compatriot of yours gets attacked, but you save him despite your appendicitis.'*

Though succinct, *Cherif* and *Tatort*'s depiction of ethnic profiling undermine colour-blind policies and egalitarian models customarily followed in French and German media, political discourse, and the justice system, which prohibit the distinction between citizens based on race, ethnicity, national origin, or religion.²⁷ As Fatima El-Tayeb puts it, such daring scenes focusing on race and ethnicity in Europe challenge the powerful universalist narrative of Europe as a colour-blind continent that presents mobilizations of race as exclusively associated to so-called 'racialized' nations like the U.S.²⁸ In the selected crime series, such pretences are challenged through the representation of ethnoracial difference as a very local issue affecting the lives of men racialized as 'Arab' in France or 'Turk' in Germany.

If ethnic minority detectives across German and French crime narratives are subject to cultural asymmetries, stereotypes, and mechanisms of social exclusion, their representation can differ markedly from series to series and at different moments within the story. From observing the characterization of the television detectives Kader Cherif, Cenk Batu, Erol Birkan and Khalil Rachedi, I would like to suggest a typology of the figure of the European ethnic minority detective. Based on observations of representational patterns, I classify three categories: one that incarnates discourse on acculturation, another that follows a hybrid cultural belonging, and finally, one that is deliberately detached from the nation majority's mores. Together, these categories put into question the progressive pretensions of the series and expose major challenges in the representation of ethnicity in European crime fiction.



THE ACCULTURATED DETECTIVE

A prominent characterization of European ethnic minority detectives follows the figure of a citizen with strong codes of ethics who is highly acculturated in the dominant group at the expense of the minority culture. A prime example of this type of detective is the German undercover agent Cenk Batu. The series opens with a mission in which he infiltrates the circles of Germany's biggest money launderer as a French entrepreneur. When Batu is put face-to-face with this leader, however, he fails to follow his superior's order to execute him and is subsequently placed on a six-month probation. As a remedial assignment, he is requested to go undercover as a Turkish ex-convict to investigate a local Turkish criminal ring that his superior notes, cannot be done by a 'blond Hans.'

Although the federal police reasoning to send Batu to an ethnic enclave suggests that Batu has an insider's understanding, it takes just a few scenes to see that aside from his appearance, he holds little attachment to received ideas of the Turkish German community. Indeed, unlike the rest of the Turkish German characters in the series who are predominantly linked to criminal activities and poverty, he does not speak Turkish fluently, is not familiar with Turkish food, nor follows Islamic customs as he drinks alcohol and is oblivious to the daily prayers when asked by a local visiting his simulated Turkish apartment. Moreover, as a secret police agent, Batu not only lives in an isolated and modern apartment complex far from the ethnic enclave, but he also works exclusively with white colleagues and the series only portrays him dating white women. Perhaps the major exceptions to his lack of contact with Turkish culture or stereotypes thereof, are Batu's regular chess games with his father that he does in standard German over the phone nearing the end of the episodes.

If Batu's representation strongly avoids markers of Turkish identity and follows an unquestionable integration into German dominant culture, it does not ignore how ethnicity intersects the character's daily experiences. In fact, Batu's assignment to incarnate a former convict living at an ethnic enclave serves both as a narrative device that simultaneously challenges stereotyped images of 'thug masculinities'²⁹ attributed to men of colour in Germany and denounces ethnic discrimination. At another interrogation with Batu, the duo of white detectives, still unaware of his secret mission, profile him as a Turkish assassin as one promptly exclaims: 'You'd even kill your sisters if they fool around with Germans, right?' By featuring ethnic prejudice within the police force, the series thus renders a critique of a German justice system that would discriminate their suspects on the basis of ethnic origin. In her study of Batu, Katharina Hall adds that his position as an undercover agent limits significantly his authority in the series and places him in an 'insider-outsider' role that is invisible to the public within the narrative and in an isolated position within the police structure



represented by his white German chief and colleagues.³⁰

A similar representation can be found in the German television series *Sinan Toprak ist der Unbestechliche* (RTL/ORF 1, 1999, 2001-2002) whose eponymous Turkish German detective (Erol Sander) has been analysed as showing very few references to his ethnic background to the extent that actor himself commented that he had played 'more German than the Germans.'³¹ Michele Mattson's analysis of *Tatort's* first Yugoslavia-born German detective, Ivo Batic, also notes that his depiction as a blue eyed detective with an impeccable Bavarian accent and complete integration into German culture detached him significantly for the foreign criminals he chased and concluded that "'ethnicity" (however problematic the term) is allowed only insofar as it does not go beyond this secondary, well-circumscribed limit.'³² A more recent example can be *Tatort Kiel's* Turkish German detective Mila Sahin (Almila Bagriacik), whose ethnicity and family background are unaddressed in the series aside from her name and in the actress's interviews mentioning her character's Turkish ethnicity. In German literature, Jakob Arjouni's private investigator Kemal Kayankaya could be considered an acculturated detective as he was adopted by a white family and consequently, lacks a connection to Turkish culture other than his race. By relying on Stephen Soitos's definition of the 'ethnic detective' as one marked by ethnoracial tropes,³³ Sandra Beck goes as far as calling Kayankaya an 'inadequate representative of the ethnic detective.' However, she admits that Kayankaya does possess a 'double consciousness detection,' which emphasizes the character's dissociation from both German and Turkish cultures.³⁴ Similar detectives are also present in French crime fiction. For example, Hassiba Lassoued qualified Mo Loumani, the Franco-Maghrebi protagonist of *Commissaire Bastille* as 'a whitewashed character who had no remaining trace of his Maghrebi cultural heritage.'³⁵ It could be suggested that the detective Lila Gloanec (Nozha Khouadra) of the series *Sur le fil* (France 2, 2007-2010) also downplays her Maghrebi culture with the exception of her son who joins a radical Islamic group. Novelist Jean-Christophe Grange's Franco-Maghrebi detective, Karim Abdouf, parallels Kayankaya since he was raised in an orphanage and consequently has no attachment to Maghrebi culture. While these characters defy stereotypes and assumptions about ethnic minorities, their representation also exposes the importance of representing cultural markers falling outside of dominant codes.

THE CULTURALLY HYBRID DETECTIVE

Other ethnic minority detectives can appear as having strong cultural connections to their minority culture while still being integrated into their nation's majority culture. A pertinent example of this type of detective is Kader Cherif. In contrast to Cenk Batu, Cherif is a Lyons local and captain



of a police squad who speaks fluent in Algerian Arabic (although he only speaks it briefly while singing at home and other succinct scenes). He is also very close to his mother, who frequently calls him over the phone in an accented standard French and frequently sends him Algerian dishes. Cherif's house is carefully decorated with Maghrebi paintings and often drinks Oriental tea with his guests. When in duty, he holds a strong sense of ethnics and, unlike his white partner, he rarely carries a gun. He also has a friendly relation with his Jewish ex-wife and is a carrying father of his teenage daughter.

Later in the series, it is revealed that he joined the police force partly because he wanted to be different from his convicted money counterfeiter father, but also because he was an avid fan of American crime series such as *Columbo* and *Kojak*. It is noteworthy that on nearly every episode, Cherif makes direct references to American ethnic crime fiction such as the poster of *Shaft* that decorates his office, illustrating further his hybrid culture. The series even includes a crossover episode³⁶ in which Cherif meets *Starsky & Hutch*'s African American detective Huggy Bear (Antonio Fargas). These connections to American ethnic crime fiction may reflect the attested inclination of French racialized minorities to look towards Anglophone popular culture to compensate for the limited cultural diversity in French television.³⁷

Cherif's cultural hybridity has also been subject to critique. Annabelle Laurent criticized his characterization by comparing him to the black British detective Luther (Idris Elba) whose ethnicity is minimally discussed aside of a set of clichés.³⁸ In his review of the series, Franco-Maghrebi journalist Redwane Telha notes that while he was happy to finally see a French TV series character who 'looks like him,' he did not feel as connected as he would be with American minority characters:

There's something that bothers me about the character. I talked to my friends –Arabs and non-Arabs – who had the same impression. In fact, we don't believe in this Arab cop. He is not realistic enough to represent anything. And this lack of realism I find it unfortunately in every Arab character on French TV.³⁹

This interpretation emphasizes that although the representation of Cherif includes more cultural traits than the proposed acculturated detective, viewers may still find him unrealistic or even insensitive to experiences of the Maghrebi minority in France. Yet, some considerations should be made when drawing conclusions about hybrid detectives because their hybrid character development can be modifiable. In the case of *Cherif*, it must be acknowledged that as the series unfolded into later seasons, the protagonist's ethnicity and family history are further explored. For example, the fourth season's episode 'La Mort de Kader Cherif,' directed by Franco-Algerian filmmaker Akim Isker, centres on a fantastic storyline that is ignited by the ghost of one of Cherif's Amazigh ancestors. Similarly, since



the fifth season, his mother stops being simply a voice on the phone as Cenk Batu's father and becomes the recurring character of Salima Cherif (Tassadit Mandi). Such changes in the series might suggest that longevity could help solve some representational issues of hybrid detectives.

In German television, the detective Sibel (Sibel Kekilli) from *Bruder-Schwarze Macht* (ZDF, 2017) follows a similar hybrid representation. Indeed, she is a successful police officer who is able to maintain her links to Turkish culture as she occasionally speaks in Turkish to her daughter, practices Islam and wears an Islamic headscarf in several scenes at a mosque or in a funeral. It is noteworthy that the series contrasts Sibel with her young brother who is involved in a radical Islamic group, arguably positioning her as a model minority. In German literature, this type of detective resonates well with Su Turhan's Turkish German detective Zeki Demirbilek who is presented as perfectly integrated into German dominant culture, while also speaking Turkish fluently and being well acquainted with both cultures. Demirbilek has been analysed as an idealized characterization of Turkish German detective because he only embraces aspects of Turkish culture that are not threatening to the dominant culture.⁴⁰ It thus sets this type of detective as a model of successful hybridity and cultural integration whilst demonstrating the limits of representing cultural difference in European crime narratives.

THE UNORTHODOX DETECTIVE

A third variation of the European ethnic minority detective are those who do not strictly follow dominant culture's codes and instead, decide to play by their own set of rules. Such characterizations tend to occur when the investigators challenge their justice system because they deem it corrupt or unfair. One of such characters is the Turkish German detective Erol Birkan (Fahri Yardım) from *Dogs of Berlin* who is an openly gay police investigator from the Berlin's drug squad. In a similar scenario to Cenk Batu's undercover investigation, Birkan is assigned the investigation of the murder of a Turkish German football player because the homicide unit needs a 'Turk' for communication purposes. Birkan initially rejects the assignment because he prefers to investigate a drug trafficking ring affecting the marginalized community where he grew up. As the story unfolds, it is revealed that Birkan grew up in the ethnic enclave where the Tarik-Amir mafia operates and was bullied as a child by its members. As soon as the mafia murders his life mentor and is beaten by a group of men who he thinks are from that mafia, Birkan agrees to join the police squad, thereby holding a personal motive to carry the investigation.

Contrary to Batu or the short scenes of Cherif speaking Arabic, Birkan speaks Turkish fluently in several scenes and is well known in the Turkish German neighbourhood. While his work ethics and moral codes are



generally strong, he falls from protocol when he tracks the phone of a teenager who befriends the mafia, and ultimately, accepts a deal with his unethical white partner to break his official police oath and not denounce a Neo-Nazi leader so that he and his partner could receive federal funds to combat Berlin's organised crime.

Another character fitting this type of detective is the Franco-Maghrebi detective Khalil Rachedi (Tahar Rahim) from the Franco-British series *The Last Panthers*. Like Birkan, Rachedi is assigned to investigate an international diamond heist because he is a former petty criminal hailing from a Marseilles ethnic enclave. Similarly, the detective is teamed with a corrupt white chief investigator who removes him from the assignment as soon as he tracks relevant information about the crime. Working against the system, Rachedi conducts a counter investigation along with his criminal brother Mokhtar. With Mokhtar, he intimidates criminals in order to expose his partner's corruption. However, his unorthodox strategy crumbles when his colleague is murdered and learns that his brother was also collaborating with the crime ring. At the end of the series, Rachedi breaks his ties with his brother, signalling his choice of moral duty over personal agendas.

Other representations of unconventional detectives can be found in novelist Lakhdar Belaid's Franco-Maghrebi detective duo of Lieutenant Bensalem and journalist Karim Khoja who, against the white anti-terrorist police's orders, launch their own investigation on a local terrorist cell. The tenth season of *Profilage* (TF1, 2009-) depicts the unorthodox lead investigator of colour, Elisa Bergman (Tamara Marthe), who in a theft gone wrong is mistaken for a criminal psychologist at the police station where her uncle happens to be the police chief. Bergman's detection is characterized precisely by her disobedience of orders.

The unorthodox ethnic minority detective is also prominent in comic crime fiction. We may think, for example, of the foolish and inept detective, lieutenant Khalid Belkacem (Booder), in Djamel Bensalah's comic crime film *Beur sur la ville* (2011) who is assigned a major homicide investigation simply because of a new affirmative action initiative at the national police level. His incompetence prevents him to follow orders, but ultimately his ruses help solve the major crime. In British crime fiction, Stephen Knight sees a similar comic unorthodox detective in Joe Sixsmith, who he considers to be more of a comic character narrating lower-middle-class life than a crime-focused detective of multiracial Britain.⁴¹ All these characters counter the previous representational types discussed with regard to their relation to dominant culture while simultaneously criticize justice systems and occasionally, the crime genre itself.



SHAPING THE EUROPEAN ETHNIC MINORITY DETECTIVE

In addition to the proposed typology, the four characters share several storylines and visual imagery that problematize further what it means to be a detective of colour in French and German television. The existence of such patterns hints that even though crime series have opened new roles to minorities in these European television cultures, they are still confronted to forms of typecasting, stereotypes, and tropes that continue to evolve into new representational processes.

In her analysis of Cenk Batu, Berna Gueneli notes that the recurrence of shower scenes exposing the character's athletic naked body function as exoticizing and eroticizing moments of voyeurism directed at the ethnic Other.⁴² This eroticized ethnicization, she argues, puts into question the perceived social progress in casting ethnic minorities in lead investigator roles. The characterization of the Cherif who frequently flirts with most female characters also seems to follow such a sexualization as seen in a series review: '[...] he is a charming charmer, charmed by his strict partner, who is also attracted to him.'⁴³

Family links to criminality and violence are widely recurrent among the studied French and German ethnic minority detectives. With the exception of Batu, in whose case little is known about his family, all the selected detectives have an explicitly criminal or violent male parent. Cherif's father and Khalil's brother are unemployed former convicts who, in the course of the series, betray the protagonists, while Birkan's father is a practicing Muslim homophobe estranged from his family. As previously noted, the German series *Bruder-Schwarze Macht* and *Sur le fil* also include stories of women detectives of colour with a relative who joins a radical Islamic group. *Profilage's* Elisa Bergman is also haunted by her criminal past and her convicted ex-lover. The majority of the series studied, then, seem to ultimately embrace a narrative of reformed exceptional minorities-within-minorities saved by the justice system.

It is noteworthy that the displayed romantic relations of all ethnic minority detectives studied as well as those in the series *Sinan Tropak*, *Profilages*, *Bruder-Schwarze Macht* and *Sur Le fil* are exclusively with white characters belonging to the nation majority's culture. I must stress that in the mixed-couple scenes, ethnic difference is seldom evoked, thus putting into question the series' active engagement with discourse on race and multiculturalism. According to Catherine Squires, interracial couples in television have the potential to function as a post-racial aesthetic device that integrates a cast and brings racial controversy and difference to the small screens, but often do so by disregarding institutionalized racist regimes.⁴⁴ This trend could also be understood as forms of 'symbolic multiculturalism,' which consists of strategic content diversification in



order to satisfy inclusion demands while preserving the cultural hegemony of the dominant cultural group.⁴⁵

The presence of all these representational patterns in the selected series is a complex issue, and one which is bounded by competing factors. Certainly, it cannot be overlooked that biased representations relate to racist violence of early and recent European history. As Tore Björge and Rob Witte note, since the 1980s, Europe has seen increased waves of nationalism, ethnocentrism, and racism, which has influenced the representation of non-white minorities in public discourse and media as threats and causes of socio-economic problems and crime.⁴⁶ Studies on German media and crime fiction indeed confirm that ethnic minority characters, and especially Turkish Germans, are often presented as foreigners⁴⁷, immigrants⁴⁸, thugs⁴⁹ and terrorists in post-11 September media.⁵⁰ Angela Kimyongür also relates negative representations of ethnic and religious minorities in French crime literature and media to pervasive colonial literary tropes.⁵¹

Without minimising the role of racism and colonial heritage in the representation of detectives of colour, I believe it is important to address some patterns from other perspectives that account for the complexity of the audio-visual medium. For example, one dynamic that could partially explain constructions such as the acculturated detective or the series' reluctance to represent prominent markers of ethnicity or superficial representations of interethnic couples, is indeed the imprint of the European pretence of colour-blind citizenship. Here, such a narrative and aesthetic strategy, although far from unproblematic, could be alleged to be in place in order to eschew communitarian structures and promote social equality within the characters and among viewers.

Beyond ideological considerations, broader discussions of commercial trends in French and German mainstream television should also be considered. The observed erotization imposed to the detectives of colour, for instance, correlates with studies showing the over-sexualization of ethnic minorities in both television cultures.⁵² Mainstream viewer's preferences have also been evoked in the discussion of the absence of 'foreign-sounding' titles of French crime television series. Screenwriter Luc Fouliard notes that marketing strategies of French productions seem to favour titles that include either common or familiar names and words, such as *Navarro* (one of the five most common surnames in French Algeria), *Julie Lescaut* (echoing the classic novel, *Manon Lescaut*) or *Falco* (echoing the French word for falcon), and systematically discourage non-European names because they are deemed 'divisive.'⁵³ He links this practice to the naming of the crime series *Commissariat Bastille* [Bastille Police Station] which features a Franco-Maghrebi detective, but also of *Cherif*, which he associates with the English term 'sheriff.'⁵⁴

Other representational patterns might be better explained by considering broadcasting limitations and concerns of European mass media. For



example, studies on European television have previously attributed the avoidance, or at least the moderation of scenes of racial intolerance, as an effort to prevent viewer emulation.⁵⁵ Within the context of Western European broadcasters, the series' limited engagement with discussions of race and ethnicity could also reflect European hesitations to follow formats imported from American series featuring ethnic minorities.⁵⁶ Such a practice could thus constitute a way to avoid the Americanization of content, which is a matter of constant debate in European media policies against cultural homogenization.⁵⁷

When considering all these commercial and ideological limitations together, the figure of the European detective of colour becomes that of a character closely intertwined with societal discourse and audio-visual conventions. If in literature John Ball defines the ethnic detective as 'someone who appears as a minority representative in the eyes of the reader,'⁵⁸ in television, it could be argued that it is also a representative of national, regional, and global discussions about diversity, which are constantly evolving. Indeed, the four detectives studied are heroes whose representation is inherently unstable and unfinished, and inevitably, conjure issues of authenticity. By 'authentic' I am referring to the subjective standards by which minority or mainstream viewers may measure the characters' ethnicity or their detective status itself. Whether German or French, the European detective of colour seems to be a catalyst for societal debate but also full of representational possibilities.

TOWARDS A NARRATIVE OF A POSTMIGRANT EUROPE?

Although the studied detectives embody stereotypes and biases, there are aspects in the series that point towards the weakening and overcoming of othering categories of French and German societies. Such subversive moments do not embrace post-racial ideologies or symbolic multicultural policies, but rather a postmigrant perspective that describes a historical condition in which migration and social plurality are central to everyday life in Europe. The concept of Postmigration describes a new type of society that emerges when dominant narratives acknowledge the reality of being a site of migration rooted in social diversity.⁵⁹ Here, migration becomes a twofold trigger concept that simultaneously conveys a metanarrative of social division as well as acts as currency of social diversity, which emphasizes the heterogeneity of individuals as an essential condition.⁶⁰ It stresses, above all, that such a society as a whole has and continues to experience migration, not only those who have actually migrated. As a result, its members are said to be no longer predominantly defined by 'native-migrant' binaries or by race and ethnicity, but rather, by political



attitudes and ideologies towards plurality, heterogeneity, migration, and diversity. Far from being a utopia, postmigrant societies are characterized by multiple conflicts, debates, and negotiations that arise as societies struggle with coming into terms with social plurality.⁶¹

If I resort to the concept of postmigrant societies to analyse the European series, it is because they all evoke two central questions of Postmigration. First, a theoretical one, about how to think of the ambivalences and ambiguities on national identity in societies where migration is no longer regarded as an exceptional event;⁶² and second, the practical one of how cultural artifacts can contribute to a better understanding of sociomaterial transformations brought about by former and ongoing migrations.⁶³ Certainly, the scenes of discrimination against the detectives of colour as well as the controversies surrounding their representation remind us of the social struggles taking place in France and Germany, but they can also reflect broader issues of contemporary Europe. In fact, they can also be analysed as narratives of European societies fraught with challenges and exchanges that occur upon the recognition of the evolvement of cultural diversity in society. After all, although the series present their protagonists' identity as unbalanced, they do so without putting into question their belonging to their national cultures.

It is notable that the crime series' inclusion of ethnic minority lead detectives in their thirties and forties also shows a clear change from 1980s and 1990s French and German crime fiction, which had predominantly centred on younger or immigrant minority characters. Similarly, none of the detectives seem to be confronted with tropes of 'culture of solidarity' with other minorities nor live in societies without ethnic conflict. All the protagonists face complex relations with their ethnic community as seen in Birkan's conflict with the local mafia or Rachedi's rejection of his criminal brother. The white majority society is also represented as heterogenous, especially in regard to accepting cultural diversity. European whites include on the one hand, the protagonists' lovers, friends, and colleagues who accept plurality in their European societies, but on the other, the Berlin Neo-Nazis or the soldier who tells Cherif that if French politicians would have 'left the army's hands free' during the French-Algerian War, 'he would be playing less smart.'⁶⁴ The crime series show precisely contradictory societies that at times reject and accept plurality.

CONCLUSION

In this article, I have highlighted the role that typologies and narrative tropes play in the representation of ethnic minorities in a selection of French and German crime television series. More specifically, I showed that despite the presence of lead investigators of colour, they remain marked by known stereotypes and *topoi* that have been used to portray



ethnic minorities. Thorough reflections of ethnic difference continue to be limited in these television cultures, an aspect that casts doubt on the effectiveness of the productions' diversity initiatives. Despite these issues, the progress that the characters bring to European screens cannot be underestimated: they offer identificatory figures for minority and majority audiences and attests changes between the 'us' and 'the others' that have long defined Europe's self-understanding.

The representational shortcomings and arguable successes of the selected series propose that it is through processes of cultural negotiation, hybridity, and conflict that new understandings of Europe and Europeans can emerge. But my study also contributes to the bigger question of how crime fiction scholarship can partake in the processes of social transformation that characterize postmigrant societies. As Regina Römhild pointedly notes, critical migration research has been traditionally understood as 'research about migrants, which has produced a 'migrantology' that is capable of little more than illustrating othering ascriptions.⁶⁵ She suggests to shift our perspectives towards 'demigrantising' migration research while 'migrantising' research into culture and society.⁶⁶ Although critical studies on the so-called ethnic detective have been invaluable to identify representational patterns across the European series, they also forge a 'migrantological' approach that places the detectives at the margins of European crime fiction. By analysing the protagonists of *Cherif*, *Dogs of Berlin*, *The Last Panthers*, and *Tatort* Hambourg as French or German detectives whose representation and stories inscribe in major dynamics of their respective European television and literary cultures, this study stresses how crime series offer a rich field for critical examinations of the ambivalences and changes of European postmigrant societies.



Notes

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² Fatima El Tayeb, *European Others: Queering Ethnicity in Postnational Europe* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), p. xxvii.

³ Cf. Alec Hargreaves and Antonio Perotti, 'The representation on French television of immigrants and ethnic minorities of third World origin', *New Community*, 19.2 (1993), 251–261; Jessika Ter Wal, 'Introduction', in *Racism and Cultural Diversity in the Mass Media* (Vienna: European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia, 2002), pp.11–26; Jakob-Moritz Eberl *et al.*, 'The European Media Discourse on Immigration and its Effects: a Literature Review', *Annals of the International Communication Association*, 42.3 (2018), 207–223; Katharina Hall, *Crime Fiction in German: Der Krimi* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2016).

⁴ Sylvie Dumerlat, 'The Algerian War and its Afterlives Painted Noir in *Sérail Killers* by Lakhdar Belaïd: *Beur Literature or Roman Noir?*', *Expressions Maghrébines*, 7.1 (2008), 148–158, (p. 142–143).

⁵ Claire Gorrara, *The Roman Noir in Post-War French Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 92.

⁶ Stephen Soitos, *Blues Detective: A Study of African American Detective Fiction* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1996), p. 33.

⁷ Axel Stähler, 'Screaming "Black" Murder: Crime Fiction and the Construction of Ethnic Identities', *English Studies*, 100.1 (2019), 43–62 (p. 43).

⁸ *Ivi*, p. 60.

⁹ Stephen Knight, *Crime Fiction 1800-2000: Detection, Death, Diversity* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004), p. 187.

¹⁰ Durmelat, p.156.

¹¹ Novotny Lawrence, *Blaxploitation Films of the 1970s: Blackness and Genre* (New York: Routledge, 2008), p. 29.

¹² Gina Macdonald and Andrew Macdonald, 'Ethnic Detectives in Popular Fiction: New Directions for an American Genre', in *Multicultural Detective Fiction: Murder from the "Other" Side*, ed. by Adrienne Johnson Gosselin (New York: Garland, 1999), p. 60.

¹³ Cf. Sam Neath, 'Loftier Ideals? France, Big Brother, and the Banlieues', *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies*, 8.2 (2004), 13541; Éric Macé, 'La Fiction télévisuelle française au miroir de *The Wire*', *Réseaux*, 5.1 (2013) 179–204.

¹⁴ Ginette Vincendeau, 'From the Margins to the Center: French Stardom and Ethnicity', in *A Companion to Contemporary French Cinema*, ed. by Alistair Fox, Michel Marie and Raphaëlle Moine (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2015), pp. 1279–1334, (p. 1291).

¹⁵ *Ibidem*.

¹⁶ Michelle Mattson, 'Tatort: The Generation of Public Identity in a German Crime Series', *New German Critique*, 78.1 (1999), 161–81, (p. 169).

¹⁷ Vera Alexander, 'Investigating the Motif of Crime as Transcultural Border Crossing: *Cinnamon Gardens and The Sand Glass*', in *Postcolonial Postmortems: Crime Fiction from a Transcultural Perspective*, ed. by Christine Matzke and Susanne Muehleisen (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006), pp.139–160, (p. 142).



¹⁸ Kerry Dune, 'Detecting Identity: Reading the Clues in German Language Crime Fiction by Klüpfel and Kobr and Steinfest', in *Detectives, Dystopias, and Poplit: Studies in Modern German Genre Fiction*, ed. by Bruce P. Campbell and Allison Guenther-Pal (New York: Camden House, 2014), p. 154.

¹⁹ Ivi, p. 159.

²⁰ Monika Mueller and Dorothea Fischer-Hornung, *Sleuthing Ethnicity: The Detective in Multiethnic Crime Fiction* (London: Associated University Press, 2003), p. 299.

²¹ Naika Foroutan, 'The Post-migrant Paradigm', in *Refugees Welcome: Difference and Diversity in a Changing Germany*, ed. by Jan-Jonathan Bock and Sharon Macdonald (New York: Berghahn Books, 2019), pp. 142–170.

²² Claudia Breger, 'Hardboiled Performance and Affective Intimacy: Remediations of Racism in the Cenk Batu Tatorte', *Transit*, 9.2 (2014), 1–19.

²³ Anon., 'Un Chérif parmi les flics', *Le Parisien*, 13 October 2013, <https://www.leparisien.fr/culture-loisirs/un-cherif-parmi-les-flics-25-10-2013-3257207.php> [accessed 10 January 2021].

²⁴ Jakob-Moritz Eberl et al., 'The European Media Discourse on Immigration and its Effects: A Literature Review', *Annals of the International Communication Association*, 42.3, (2018), 207–223.

²⁵ "Les Liens du Sang", *Cherif*, S01xE01 (directed by Vincent Giovanni, 2013).

²⁶ Auf der Sonnenseite, *Tatort Hamburg*, E708, (directed by Richard Huber, 2008).

²⁷ Cf. Katelyn E. Knox, *Race on Display in 20th and 21st Century France* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2016), p. 14; Boulou Ebanda de B'beri and Fethi Mansouri, 'Contextualising Multiculturalism in the Twenty-First Century', in *Global Perspectives on the Politics of Multiculturalism in the 21st Century* (New York: Routledge, 2014), p. 2.

²⁸ Fatima El Tayeb, *European Others: Queering Ethnicity in Postnational Europe* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), pp. xv–xxix.

²⁹ Arlene Teraoka, 'Detecting Ethnicity: Jakob Arjouni and the Case of the Missing German Detective Novel', *The German Quarterly*, 72.3, (1999), 265–289, [p.270].

³⁰ Katharina Hall, *Crime Fiction in German: Der Krimi* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2016), p.136.

³¹ Cf. Monika Mueller and Dorothea Fischer-Hornung, 'Introduction', in *Sleuthing Ethnicity: The Detective in Multiethnic Crime Fiction*, (London: Associated University Press, 2003), pp. xvii–xxii.

³² Michelle Mattson, 'Tatort: The Generation of Public Identity in a German Crime Series', *New German Critique*, 78.1 (1999), 161–81, [p. 172].

³³ Soitos suggests four tropes prominent in the representation of African American detection: a black detective persona socially and politically aware of racial prejudice, double-consciousness detection, the presence of vernaculars and ethnic signifiers such as hoodoo. Cf. Stephen Soitos, *Blues Detective: A Study of African American Detective Fiction* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1996).

³⁴ Sandra Beck, 'Blood, Sweat, and Fears: Investigation the Other in *Contemporary German Crime Fiction*', in *Contemporary German Crime Fiction*, ed. by Thomas W. Kniesche (Boston: De Gruyter, 2019), pp. 197–198.

³⁵ Hassiba Lassoued, 'Le Français d'origine maghrébine face au prisme médiatique', *Présence Francophone*, 65.1 (2005), 150–167, [p. 159].

³⁶ "Quand Cherif rencontre Huggy", *Cherif*, S05xE07 (directed by Karim Ouaret, 2018).

³⁷ Kathryn Kleppinger and Laura Reeck, *Post-Migratory Cultures in Postcolonial France* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2018), p. 6.

³⁸ Annabelle Laurent, 'Chérif, le nouveau flic "cool" de France 2', *20 Minutes*, 22 October 2013, <https://www.20minutes.fr/television/1240163-20131022-20131022-cherif-nouveau-flic-cool->



[france-2](#) [accessed 20 February 2021]

³⁹ Telha Redwane, 'Cherif, fais-moi beur', *France Inter*, 5 January 2018, <https://www.franceinter.fr/emissions/capture-d-ecrans/capture-d-ecrans-05-janvier-2018> [accessed 20 January 2021].

⁴⁰ Katharina Hall, *Crime Fiction in German: Der Krimi*, (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2016), p. 100.

⁴¹ Stephen Knight, *Crime Fiction 1800-2000: Detection, Death, Diversity* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004), p. 187.

⁴² Berna Gueneli, 'Mehmet Kurtulus and Birol Ünel: Sexualized Masculinities, Normalized Ethnicities', in *Turkish German Cinema in the New Millennium: Sites, Sounds, and Screens*, ed. by Sabine Hake and Barbara Mennel, (New York: Berghahn, 2012), p.136–148, (p. 136).

⁴³ Isabelle Morini-Bosc, 'La Série Chérif est un miracle', *RTL*, 15 January 2016, <https://www.rtl.fr/culture/medias-people/la-serie-cherif-est-un-miracle-7781378446>, [accessed 20 January 2021]

⁴⁴ Catherine Squires, *The Post-Racial Mystique: Media and Race in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: New York University Press, 2014), p. 105.

⁴⁵ Michele Wallace, 'The Search for the Good Enough Mammy: Multiculturalism, Popular Culture and Psychoanalysis', in *Multiculturalism: A Critical Reader*, ed. by David Goldberg (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1994), pp. 259–268.

⁴⁶ Tore Björge and Rob Witte, *Racist Violence in Europe* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994), p. 2.

⁴⁷ Margaret Sutherland, 'Images of Turks in Recent German Fiction: A Comparative Case Study in Xenophobia', in *The Foreign in International Crime Fiction: Transcultural Representations*, ed. by Jean Anderson, Carolina Miranda and Barbara Pezzotti (London: Continuum, 2012), pp.188–199, (p.189).

⁴⁸ Katharina Hall, *Crime Fiction in German: Der Krimi* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2016), p. 12.

⁴⁹ Arlene Teraoka, p. 270.

⁵⁰ Claudia Breger, 'Hardboiled Performance and Affective Intimacy: Remediations of Racism in the Cenk Batu Tatorte', *Transit*, 9.2 (2014), 1–19.

⁵¹ Angela Kimyongür, 'Social Conflict in the Contemporary French Roman Noir', *Australian Journal of Crime Fiction*, 1.1 (2015), 1–11.

⁵² Cf. Mehammed Amadeus Mack, *Sexagon: Muslims, France and the Sexualization of National Culture*, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017), p. 244; Berna Gueneli, 'Mehmet Kurtulus and Birol Ünel: Sexualized Masculinities, Normalized Ethnicities', in *Turkish German Cinema in the New Millennium: Sites, Sounds, and Screens*, ed. by Sabine Hake and Barbara Mennel, (New York: Berghahn, 2012), pp. 136–148; Nicki Hitchcott, 'Calixthe Beyala: Black face(s) on French TV', *Modern & Contemporary France*, 12.4 (2004), 473–482.

⁵³ Luc Fouliard, *Le scénario de A à Z*, (La Madeleine: Lettmotif, 2018), pp. 250–251.

⁵⁴ Ivi, p. 251.

⁵⁵ Tore Björge, 'Role of the Media in *Racist Violence*', in *Racist Violence in Europe*, ed. by Tore Björge and Robe Witte (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994), p. 99.

⁵⁶ Imports and adaptations of American productions such as reality shows have played an important role in the representation of visible minorities in Western European television, where they were historically less prominent in television series as opposed to documentaries, news coverage, and film. In France, researchers and the broadcasting regulatory body, the *Conseil supérieur de l'audiovisuel* (CSA), have noted that American productions offer the largest site of visible minorities in French television, an observation that also resonates with studies on German media. Cf. Timothy Havens,



Black Television Travels: African American Media Around the Globe (New York: New York University Press, 2013); Magali Nayrac, 'La question de la représentation des minorités dans les médias, ou le champ médiatique comme révélateur d'enjeux sociopolitiques contemporains,' *Cahiers de l'Urmis*, 13.1, (2011), 1–17; Marie-France Malonga, *Qui a peur de la télévision en couleurs?* (Montreuil: Aux lieux d'être, 2007); Damani Partridge, 'Occupying American "Black" Bodies and Reconfiguring European Spaces-The Possibilities for Noncitizen Articulations in Berlin and Beyond', in *Transforming Anthropology* 21, 1.1 (2013), 41–56; Margreth Lünenborg and Elfriede Fürsich, 'Media and the Intersectional Other, *Feminist Media Studies*', 14.6 (2014), 959–975.

⁵⁷ Eli Noam, *Television in Europe* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 27.

⁵⁸ John Dudley Ball, *The Mystery Story* (San Diego: University of California Press, 1976).

⁵⁹ Naika Foroutan, p.155.

⁶⁰ Ivi, p.153.

⁶¹ Riem Spielhaus, 'Studien in der postmigrantischen Gesellschaft: Eine Kritische Auseinandersetzung', in *Kongressdokumentation 4. Bundesfachkongress Interkultur, Hamburg 2012*, ed. by Marius Koniarczyck, Claudia Niemeyer, Natascha Tomchuk and Anja Turner, (2014), 96–100. (p.96–97).

⁶² Naika Foroutan, p. 152.

⁶³ Anne Ring Petersen and Moritz Schramm, '(Post-)Migration in the Age of Globalisation: New Challenges to Imagination and Representation', *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture* 9.2 (2017), 1–12 (p. 2).

⁶⁴ "Code d'honneur", *Cherif*, S02xE04 (directed by Vincent Giovanni, 2015).

⁶⁵ Regina Römhild, 'Beyond the Bounds of the Ethnic: For Postmigrant Cultural and Social Research', *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture*, 9.2 (2017), 69–75 (p. 73).

⁶⁶ Ivi.