"POLAR NOIR" :
reading african-american detective fiction

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Curiosity and the desire to grasp the specificity of an abundantly read African American genre born as the 20th century was beginning are the research intentions that inspire this volume. Indeed, only recently has African-American detective fiction drawn the attention of scholars in spite of its very diverse blossoming since the 1960s. Diverse, because it has moved out of its birthplace, East coast cities, and because female novelists have contributed their own production. At the heart of this popular genre, as novelists Barbara Neely, Paula Woods and Gar Haywood tell us, is black existence: black memory, black living places and the human environments that build the individual - hence a détour to the French Caribbean.

La curiosité et le désir de cerner les spécificités d’un genre que les Afro-Américains se sont approprié à l’aube du 20e siècle, telles sont les intentions de recherche animant le présent volume. Beaucoup lu par tous les publics (Chester Himes connut d’abord le succès en France), le polar afro-américain reste relativement peu étudié en dépit d’une production très abondante et diverse depuis les années soixante. Diverse parce qu’elle a essaimé hors de la côte Est, et parce que les romancières sont venues l’enrichir.

Le vécu racial, comme nous le disent Barbara Neely, Paula Woods et Gar Haywood est au cœur de ce genre populaire : la mémoire noire, les lieux noirs et les environnements humains qui construisent l’être - d’où une incursion en Caraïbe francophone.

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Avant-propos — Foreword

1 Un symposium organisé par le GRAAT, en collaboration avec l’Equipe Anglaise de Caen, à l’Université François-Rabelais (Tours) en 2001 est à l’origine de ce volume. Trois auteurs de romans policiers, Barbara Neely, Paula Woods et Gar Haywood vinrent des Etats-Unis pour la circonstance. Chacun d’eux nous donna bien des clés de leur œuvre au cours de la table ronde.

2 La collaboration internationale ne s’arrête pas là car le symposium de Tours connut une suite lors d’un atelier du congrès du CAAR de Winchester (GB) en 2003. Quelques articles du présent volume en sont issus.

3 Le volume se présente en cinq parties, dont la première est naturellement générique. La seconde s’intéresse à la configuration de l’espace romanesque. La troisième se tourne vers les romancières, tandis que la quatrième est consacrée à Walter Mosley, un des grands noms contemporains. La dernière partie est composée d’une transcription de la table ronde et d’une interview de Valerie Wilson Wesley.

4 This volume’s starting point is a joint symposium sponsored by the GRAAT and l’Equipe Anglaise de Caen that was held at Université François-Rabelais (Tours, France) in 2001. Three detective fiction novelists Barbara Neely, Paula Woods and Gar Haywood traveled to France for this event. All of them commented upon their art during the round table that was held.

5 International collaboration continued when the Tours symposium was followed by a workshop held during the CAAR Winchester (UK) conference in 2003. A few of the essays in this volume were presented then.

6 The volume comprises five parts, the first of which is understandably generic. The second looks at the representation of fictional space. The third deals with feminine characters and/or writers, while the fourth studies Walter Mosley, one of today’s major writers. The last is composed of the transcription of the round table and an interview of Valerie Wilson Wesley.
I. Variations on a genre
African-American Detective Fiction: Surveying the Genre

Stephen Soitos

1 African American writers have written detective fiction since the very beginning of the 20th century. Right from the first serialized detective novels published in African American periodical literature black writers adapted the accepted conventions of detective fiction to their own ends. Writing for black readers, and eager to affirm the blacks’ place in the world, it was only natural for them to transfer their stories into a black context. This meant introducing black speech, black attitudes and beliefs, generally speaking, black culture. Black rank and file characters were not enough. The detective must also be black, which meant the introduction of double conscious detection, through a persona that was able to build bridges between the two worlds. Overall, the Euro-American popular literary form was used to examine issues of race, class and gender through an African American perspective. Authors such as Pauline E. Hopkins, John Edward Bruce, Rudolph Fisher, Chester Hines, Ishmael Reed, and Clarence Major were the first African American writers to write detective novels with black detectives — members of the force, or citizens taking it upon themselves to solve a case. These authors established a tradition of black detective writing that has laid the groundwork for many new African American detective and mystery story writers working in the second half of the 20th century and into the present day.

2 Detective fiction is a relatively recent literary creation. Edgar Allan Poe is credited with introducing the idea of the detective hero when he wrote such stories as Murders on the Rue Morgue (1841) and The Purloined Letter (1845). Poe’s brilliant amateur detective Dupin was the first model for what has proven to be an extremely popular genre type. Poe also established many of the conventions of the detective novel, including a story narrated by a close associate of the detective, a bumbling police force, the eccentric detective, the locked room mystery, and the idea of clues leading to the exposing of the murderer. However, even though the detective formula was invented in the 1840s there were few literary detectives until the rise of pipe-smoking (but not necessarily tobacco-smoking) Sherlock Holmes of Baker Street, flanked by his unauthorized chronicler, the good-but-not-so-bright Dr. Watson, late in the 19th century. In America in the 1920s Dashiell
Hammett and Raymond Chandler created a new variation of the detective featuring a hardboiled hero who narrates his own story in the first person.

Evidence from black periodical literature indicates that African Americans were quick to pick up on the popular art form. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries African Americans were generally not published by white-owned and white-edited magazines and newspapers. Black creativity needed an outlet. Agency was the way to visibility and self-respect. As Emmett J. Scott, the Johnson brothers and Oscar Micheaux later did in the film industry, journalists and writers took things in their own hands and formed their own alternative black-owned publications. A few, like *The Colored American Magazine* (1900-1909, first published in Boston then in New York, with a readership as high as 15,000) or *McGirt’s Magazine* (1903-1909) based in Philadelphia reached a wider audience. But, from the beginning these periodicals were dubbed “little” because of their small circulation, usually under 1,000 subscribers. Many were local, resulting from the initiatives of churches, for instance. Some were short-lived ventures resting on the energies of a single individual or a tiny group. But all, large or small, were popular culture media for poetry, fiction and essays written by African American writers for black audiences. It is in these periodicals that the first detective and mystery stories written by African Americans made their appearance. Much of the early ephemeral African American periodical literature is lost or lying forgotten in libraries. Therefore, there may exist even earlier examples of black detective fiction to rediscover.

The two known earliest black detective novels are Pauline Hopkins’s *Hagar’s Daughter* (1901-02) published serially in *The Colored American Magazine* and John Bruce’s *The Black Sleuth* (1908-09) published in *McGirt’s Magazine*. Both these novels contain black detectives who, this is remarkable, break the pattern of the isolated eccentric detective Poe and Doyle had established. In these two early black novels the detectives work together in a team to solve crimes, and their families are important aspects of their identities. In *Hagar’s Daughter*, a servant girl named Venus Johnson works in consort with another black detective to help solve the mystery of Hagar’s missing daughter. *The Black Sleuth’s* detective is an African who comes to the United States and joins a multi-racial international detective agency. These two novels also establish the black distinctive detective tradition in other important ways through the inclusion of black vernacular, the music of black speech (not just the words and syntax of it), as well as double conscious detectives whose black identity (sometimes even their knowledge of Hoodoo folk religion) is essential to the solving of the murders. Although the novels may contain sensational otherworldly elements, they are written primarily as social critiques of the color line in pre-and post-Civil War Southern society.

Pauline Hopkins was an editor of *The Colored American*. She was a prolific author, writing both fiction and prose, and a social activist. In *Hagar’s Daughter*, Hopkins’s primary metaphor for the evil of slave society and racial prejudice is *passing* and the resultant tragedies brought about by trying to hide one’s black blood. Hopkins’s bold stroke in making a black female maid a detective, the person in command, points the way to further adaptation of the detective persona by black writers. As a primary work in the detective tradition, *Hagar’s Daughter* reverses pervasive stereotypes while creating new avenues of expression for black Americans.

John Bruce was born a slave in Maryland in 1856. He became a very influential journalist, an author and political activist who wrote and published primarily for a black press and readership. Bruce was involved in political life and worked with black nationalistic
organizations that counseled black people to pursue the rights they were denied through agitation and civil disobedience. *The Black Sleuth* contains extremely outspoken attacks on white racial prejudice. It stresses the importance of black pride and centers its black detective firmly in an African tradition of kinship. Sadipe, the African who travels to the southern United States experiences bigotry first hand. He joins an international detective agency (in which Black detectives work in groups showing the strength of solidarity and community) to help find a stolen African diamond. Bruce follows a firm but unobtrusive militant agenda. His racial pride and interest in black history are incorporated into a novel that cleverly alters the conventional detective plots of the time by using an international setting and uncompromising perspectives on white supremacy and imperialism.

These early novels also make affirmative African American cultural statements by stressing the positive aspects of African American creations such as music, specific foods, and community religious practices that often refer back to an African tradition. Both Venus and Sadipe use their blackness and their menial positions as maid and waiter to help solve crimes. In this, black detective fiction characters are very different from the mixed-blood and middle class heroes of black novels published in book form at the turn of the 20th century. Black periodicals offered their authors more freedom to be racially creative — which, of course, is not to say that novelists like Dunbar or Chesnutt were satisfied with white supremacy and the denial of dignity and civil rights.

As both Hopkins and Bruce were only recently rediscovered as detective fiction writers, one cannot say that later African American detective fiction took its cue from the founders of the genre. One must, however, observe that steeping fiction in — sometimes lowly — black life and surroundings is a permanent trait of the genre. In 1932, Rudolph Fisher, a member of the Harlem Renaissance, published *The Conjure Man Dies*, long considered to have been the first-ever black detective novel. In this novel Perry Dart, the only black detective on the New York police force, works with a black doctor named Archer to solve the case of the murdered conjure man, Frimbo. All of the action of the novel takes place in Harlem and all of the characters are black. Frimbo is a black African with a degree from Harvard University as well as a spiritual connection to African religious practices. *The Conjure Man Dies* combines elements of the classical locked room mystery with Harlem Renaissance themes. In many ways, although he was not born in the U. S., Frimbo embodies the “New Negro”: a black man proud of his African heritage as well as his African American cultural achievements.

Chester Himes followed, once again using the detective novel format to criticize racist practices as well as examine class issues and violence in Harlem. Himes was the first to introduce the hardboiled tradition in black detective fiction, while giving it a distinctive hue. Writing about Harlem from Europe, and from the sense of the absurd that affirmed itself as his trademark after *The Primitive* (1955), the sardonic side of hardboiled fiction could only appeal to him as a means to speak on violence. *For Love of Imabelle* was first published in France where the outrageously absurd Harlem landscape immediately drew laughter. In some ways, the same as South Central Los Angeles in the fictions by Gar Haywood or Walter Mosley, the ghetto itself becomes as important as plot and character. Through his descriptions of Harlem streets, his emphasis on the black community and its vibrant use of language and music, Himes created a rich cityscape that illustrates the complexities of African American culture. The novels also follow a progression from first
to last as the plots become more involved and the two detectives become less effective in an increasingly chaotic world.

10 One of the primary assumptions of detective fiction is that the detective will solve the crime. But in *Blind Man with a Pistol* (1969, the last in the series, with the exception of the posthumously published *Plan B*), crimes multiply into mayhem as a back-to-Africa group, a black-Jesus movement and a black brotherhood organization battle each other in the Harlem streets. In the end no crime is solved. Coffin Ed and Grave Digger are defeated by the web of corruption that influenced their white superiors to withhold evidence. The detectives are left shooting rats in an derelict building. In *Plan B* (1993), an armed black revolution breaks out and Grave Digger kills Coffin Ed before being killed himself. Up until this point, African American detective novels had remained faithful to the detective convention of the restoration of moral order. On the contrary, Himes’s apocalyptic vision saw Harlem and African American life in general as rooted in a racism that eventually destroys both blacks and whites.

11 Ishmael Reed’s *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972) and Clarence Major’s *Reflex and Bone Structure* (1975) both continued the experimentation with the detective form initiated by Himes. Both writers chose a post-modern anti-detective form which satirizes detective conventions. These books challenge accepted viewpoints on history and the nature of knowledge and how it is received. They also attack rigid definitions of African American art, character and culture.

12 *Mumbo Jumbo* introduces the detective Papa LaBas who challenges both classical and hardboiled detective personas. As a Hoodoo detective he represents Reed’s Neo-Hoodoo aesthetic. Neo-Hoodoo is a positive African American worldview supported by African American creations in the areas of vernaculars, double consciousness detection and religion. *Mumbo Jumbo* mixes time frames and references to other popular culture forms into a hybrid detective novel that revises history with an Afrocentric emphasis. Reed uses the detective novel format to satirize white mainstream racist practices as well as critique class divisions within the black world.

13 Clarence Major’s *Reflex and Bone Structure* is a metaphysical detective novel in which the formulas of detective fiction are totally subverted. This novel extends the black detective tradition into experimental narrative territory. It signifies on appropriated Euro-American cultural literary conventions, such as character, plot, and description and parodies the detective form. It stretches the boundaries of detective fiction form by questioning how mysteries are written. The unreliable narrator in the novel is in this sense a trickster figure that displays his talent by manipulating the reader’s perceptions. With repeated references to a detective and a possible murder the novel has the eerie suspense associated with detective fiction but provides none of the typical resolutions of the form. Major’s reduction of detective fiction to the basics of understanding suggests that a new approach to perception and the nature of learning is necessary. This is particularly important to the perception of black identity in America.

14 Himes, Reed and Major have brought detective fiction into particularly creative grounds. Their shining names should not obscure from view the many authors who, in the second half of the 20th century, have used this popular genre in their own ways to introduce their views on US society from coast to coast, be it be urban or rural. Among others, Barbara Neely who uses a maid’s vantage point to look at the world of her (white) employers; Valerie Wilson Wesley whose P. I. Tamara Hayle only once leaves the Newark
area... to go to Jamaica in *Where Evil Sleeps* (1996); Eleanor Taylor Bland’s Marti MacAlister series; Gary Phillips; Robert Greer; Jake Lamar with *If 6 Were 9* (2001) — one of a kind in his work; George P. Pelecanos using the Washington, DC, area for a backdrop; Norman Kelley whose Nina Halligan is drawn in *Black Heat* (1997) into the orbit of militant organizations and the history of the civil rights movement; Paula Wood’s *Inner City Blues* (1999), or Walter Mosley’s latest in the Easy Rawlins series, *Little Scarlet* (2004) that take the reader into the Los Angeles riots, in 1965 or in 1992... The substance in all of these authors’ fictions, and others’ in this teeming field, is the United States’ racial fault line: the question of African American identity and existence. The writers, many of them women in the last 25 years, have shown how black detective fiction can reach a new and wider audience as their stories comment on a tradition of mainstream detective writing in America while continuing aspects of the black detective tradition established from the start. Black writers continue to use a popular literary form to help define a distinctive African American culture and to comment effectively on issues of race, class, and gender. Black detective fiction has grown through a common sharing and reworking of themes and tropes such as the use of black detective personas, double conscious detection, black vernaculars and Hoodoo creations.

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**NOTES**

1. Scott was Booker T. Washington’s secretary. Incensed by Griffith’s “The Birth of a Nation”, he became the father of black cinema (in Donald Boogle’s words) when he produced “The Birth of a Race” (1918). In fact, Scott’s film (of which no entire copy remains) was not the first black movie. In 1910, William Foster created the first all-black film company in Chicago. The Johnson brothers followed suit in 1916 with the Los Angeles-based Lincoln Motion Picture Company. Oscar Micheaux is frequently named as the pioneer of African American cinema. In fact, only when the Lincoln rejected the adaptation of his novel (*The Homesteader*) to the screen did Micheaux decide to found his own company in 1919. “The Exile”, 1931, was the first black talking picture. Micheaux’s last film premiered in 1948. (Reid et al. 1988, pp. 35-42.)

2. Only 64 pages of it remain in the Schomburg Center, under the form of a microfilm. This novel had fallen into oblivion (*Encarta Africana 2000* does mention Bruce’s other novel, *The Awakening of Hezekiah Jones*, 1916), until John Gruesser published an annotated version of it in 2002.

3. This caused her to lose her editorial position when, in 1904, an editor sympathetic to Booker T. Washington’s accommodating and go-slow policies took the magazine over.

4. His career as a journalist began in 1874 as a Washington correspondent for *The New York Times*. His militant entrepreneurial spirit led him to found his own paper (*The Argus* was published in Washington, IX) as early as 1879. He was active in journalism all his life, writing over the years (sometimes under the interesting penname *Bruce Grit*, which aptly connotes *courage*) for about 20 black newspapers as well as white papers nationwide. He founded the Negro Society for Historical Research in 1911, in association with Arthur A. Schomburg.

5. He was among Marcus Garvey’s most important contacts when the Jamaican first came to the US in 1916. He joined the Universal Negro Improvement Association after the red summer of 1919 and wrote columns both for the UNIA’s weekly, *Negro World*, and its *Daily Negro Times*.


7. All authors could not be mentioned here. Three internet sites prove useful (in spite of their many variations, and omissions) as directories and checklists of books:

- www.aamystery.com/directory.html lists 38 authors;
- www.imcpl.org/ams_aframystery_v.htm lists 32 writers and provides a checklist of titles;
- www.oskoshpubliclibrary.org/pages/internetguides/aframystery.pdf lists 22 authors.
This essay aims to outline the evolution of Afro-American detective fiction by looking at a few pivotal moments. The founders of the genre who wrote immediately introduced “detectives” that were close to Afro-American, even African grass roots... Although he did not bring Harlem into black detective fiction (Fisher did that), Himes can be considered as the founder of the modern black genre. Many in this prolific field have followed his lead that interestingly came into being at the request of Marcel Duhamel, the director of the Gallimard “Série Noire”.

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The “almost bitter murmur” in Rudolph Fisher’s *The Conjure Man Dies*

Mary Condé

1 Although Richard Wright’s *Native Son* (1940), for example, with its complete absence of mystery about the identity of the killer and its subversion of the legal process which condemns the killer, may be read as an antidetective novel, much African American fiction does have a strong detective element, and a sustained interest in detective skills. In Nella Larsen’s *Passing* (1929), for example, the white novelist Hugh Wentworth treats himself as a failed detective in his inability to determine whether Clare Kendry is black or white (Larsen, 206); in Gwendolyn M. Parker’s *These Same Long Bones* (1994), an African American woman watches in amusement as a white councilman attempts to hone his detective skills while in conversation with her light-skinned husband (Parker, 142-143); in Walter Mosley’s *Devil in a Blue Dress* (1990), a novel whose Easy Rawlins is the direct descendant of Rudolph Fisher’s Bubber Brown (Gosselin, 343), it is the fusion of detective skills with the highly charged activity of passing for white which provides the dramatic climax of the narrative (Mosley, 208-209).

2 Fisher’s *The Conjure Man Dies* (1932) does not treat passing, although it does treat disguise, but, very unusually for a text of this period, it manages to integrate a highly developed degree of African American consciousness into a very accomplished detective story. Although Fisher is not mentioned in a recent study of “metaphysical” detective fiction, his novel conforms exactly to its editors’ definition, of fiction in which the sleuth finds himself confronting the insoluble mystery of his own identity (Merivale and Sweeney, 2).

3 *The Conjure Man Dies* is still often regarded as the first African American detective novel (Lewis, 275, Davis 103, Perry, 1987, 254, Andrews, 240, Pepper, 79), but it is actually predated by Pauline E. Hopkins’s *Hagar’s Daughter*, published from 1901 to 1902 in the *Colored American Magazine*, J. E. Bruce’s *The Black Sleuth*, published from 1907 to 1909 in *McGirt’s Magazine* (Soitos 59), and Walter Adolphe Roberts’s *The Haunting Hand* (1926) and *The Mind Reader* (1929) (Bailey 53). Frankie Y. Bailey points out, however, that Roberts’s novels are African American only in terms of their authorship, whereas *The Conjure Man*
Dies is “the first classic detective novel set in an urban community and featuring black protagonists” (Bailey, 54). Similarly, Stephen F. Soitos, one of Fisher’s most distinguished critics, observes that it is the first black detective novel to assert proudly its detective themes in a completely black environment with an all-black cast of characters (Soitos, 93). Even at its publication it was identified as a “decided novelty—an all Negro mystery in Harlem” (Cuppy, 8).

4 The novel opens with the supposed murder of Frimbo, a fortune-teller, or conjure-man, which is effectively investigated by four detectives working together: Perry Dart, the only professional detective, his old friend doctor John Archer, Bubber Brown, an amateur detective, and, curiously enough, Frimbo himself, who investigates his own “murder”, his servant having been mistakenly killed in his place. The suspects are a pretty young woman called Martha Crouch, the wife of the undertaker Samuel Crouch who shares the building with Frimbo, Spider Webb, a numbers-runner who had come to Frimbo to find out what number he would bet on, and four clients of Frimbo's: Doty Hicks, a notorious drug-addict who believes that Frimbo has cursed his brother, Easley Jones, a railroad man who had come to check on the fidelity of his wife in Chicago, Aramintha Snead, a woman seeking help about her violent husband, and Bubber Brown’s friend Jinx Jenkins, who had come to consult Frimbo about whether he would find a job. Jinx becomes the chief suspect when he is identified as the owner of a handkerchief which has been stuffed down the dead man's throat, and Bubber joins the team of detectives to clear his friend's name.

5 After a complicated series of events involving Frimbo's “scientific” claims to have risen from the dead (a feat parodied by Bubber Brown in a farcical chase which ends at the undertaker's), and including the discovery of Frimbo's secret burning of his servant's body, the murderer is revealed as Samuel Crouch, disguised as Easley Jones, his motive being his wife Martha's adultery with Frimbo. Frimbo exposes him at the cost of his own life, since Crouch shoots him dead at the moment of revelation, an action which Frimbo had foreseen.

6 That The Conjure Man Dies is set in Harlem, a place described as the “unofficial capital for a people who, until its emergence, had none” (Chabot, 132), might immediately suggest some concern with racial issues (Kennedy, 45-46); Fisher himself proposed that Harlem and its black inhabitants were peculiarly appropriate for a detective story. Speaking in a radio interview in January 1933, after the publication of The Conjure Man Dies, he said:

   Darkness and mystery go together, don't they? The children of the night—and I say this in all seriousness—are children of mystery. The very setting is mystery—outsiders know nothing of Harlem life as it really is... what goes on behind the scenes and beneath the dark skins of Harlem folk—fiction has not found much of that yet. And much of it is perfectly in tune with the best of mystery tradition—variety, color, mysticism, superstition, malice and violence (Perry, 1976, 67).

7 The original title of the novel was A Mystery Tale of Dark Harlem (Davis, 103), and in this interview Fisher uses the word mystery four times not only to identify the tradition of the detective story, but to play both on the concept of the exotic, as in the flowery term “children of the night” for black people, and of unattainable knowledge. Doctor Archer's scientific explanations are typically met with such reactions from his fellow investigator Detective Perry Dart as “Come on down, doc.... You’re talking to a cop now, not a college professor” (8), “ Couldn't you manage to say it in English, doc?” (9), “Gosh, doc, it would be so much easier in French. Say it in French” (112), and “Don't you ever talk English?” (154).
The space which combines the concepts of the exotic and the baffling is the conjure-man Frimbo’s reception room, with its collection of African artefacts. I cannot agree here with Soitos in his claim that “this visual display of African art objects suggests the beauty of these ancestral items as well as their importance to African American images of Africa” (Soitos, 108).

This display includes a “murderous-looking” and “wicked looking” club, and is summarised as:

innumerable strange and awful shapes: gruesome black masks with hollow orbits, some smooth and bald, some horned and bearded; small misshapen statuettes of near-human creatures, resembling embryos dried and blackened in the sun, with closed bulbous eyes and great protruding lips; broad-bladed swords, slim arrows and jagged spearheads of forbidding designs (22).

The suggestion here is not of beauty but of death and terror, similar to that of the undertaker’s quarters which also form part of the house. In terms of the plot this display is credible as presenting Frimbo’s professional credentials to his clients, and useful as an assortment which may include the murder weapon. In terms of “African American images of Africa” it tends only to confirm the doctor’s later diagnosis of Frimbo as “a very special kind of nut” (152). It plays an important part in what James de Jongh calls “the claustrophobic circle of the crime scene” (de Jongh, 44) in establishing another area of perplexity; Frimbo, as an African king, is as mysterious a being to the other characters as he is to the reader, and it is significant that he is found the most sympathetic by the character with whom he shares at least some of his esoteric knowledge, Doctor Archer (127). In so far as the other characters fail to understand him, they fail to feel any affection or admiration for him.

An important element in the narrative is the repartee of Jinx Jenkins and Bubber Brown, a pair who do feel affection and admiration for each other. They had previously appeared in Fisher’s first novel, The Walls of Jericho, and one critic, writing in 1982, remarks severely of them here that they

are a comedy team who made the novel a very funny work in 1928, when it appeared. Unfortunately, styles in humor change, and the patter of Jinx and Bubber is boring to a modern reader (Davis, 101).

Their patter, since much of it consists of gibes about blackness, might also be held to be embarrassing for a modern reader, and this might help to account for the comparative critical neglect of Fisher (Balshaw, 38), completely omitted, for example, from James O. Young’s Black Writers of the Thirties (1973) and Houston A. Baker Jr.’s Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance (1987). Late in 1998 the opera singer Jessye Norman felt that even a joke about her weight conformed to a “degrading racist stereotype of a person of African-American heritage” (Gentleman, 16); Jinx and Bubber actually make jokes about blacks being descended from apes. However, as Frankie Y. Bailey observes, Jinx and Bubber “are more complex than the stock comic blacks of the period” (Bailey, 56); part of this complexity may lie in Fisher’s own analysis of their lack of understanding of the verbal abuse they heap on each other. In The Walls of Jericho he casts an almost anthropological eye on it, saying that:

As a matter of fact, the habitual dissension between these two was the symptom of a deep affection which neither, on question, would have admitted.... Words and gestures which in a different order of life would have required no suppression became with them necessarily inverted, found issue only by assuming a precisely opposite aspect, concealed a profound attachment by exposing an extravagant
enmity. And this was a distortion of behaviour so completely imposed upon them by their traditions and society that even they themselves did not know they were masquerading (5).

Fisher again uses the notion of masquerade when he comments on the pair’s quarrelling in The Conjure Man Dies, but this time in a manner particularly appropriate to a detective novel. He writes:

It was only because the hostility of these two was actually an elaborate masquerade, whereby they concealed the most genuine affection for each other, that they could come so close to blows that were never offered. Yet to the observer this mock antagonism would have appeared alarmingly real (20).

Here Fisher reminds us of one of the basic principles of the detective story, that appearances can be deceptive. At the same time, he is offering us inside information on Harlem behaviour unavailable to the ignorant “observer”, with a sidelong glance at his own art as a novelist, just as he was to do in his radio interview with his observation that what goes on behind the scenes and beneath the dark skins of Harlem folk – fiction has not found much of that yet.

What David Levering Lewis calls the “Amos ‘n’ Andy dialogue” of Jinx and Bubber (Lewis, 275) also performs the essential function of distracting us away from Samuel Crouch, besides establishing the issue of class, an issue not adequately examined in relation to the Harlem Renaissance (Gibson, 44). It is one of the aspects of the ‘decided novelty’ of this “all Negro mystery” that the black characters’ different levels of social status are meticulously registered, implicitly arguing for the complexities and differences of the African American community.

Since Fisher had previously been attacked by Du Bois for failing to “paint his own kind” in The Walls of Jericho (Wintz, 145), Doctor Archer is probably a response to this criticism. He is not only an able physician and an intellectual, but a benevolent authority figure: Fisher remarks casually of his first two patients one Sunday morning that the first pleaded a bad cold and got his liquor prescription, the second pleaded hard times and borrowed three dollars (119).

As Fisher was also a doctor, and as Archer is the single character, apart from Frimbo, who has the best grasp of events, it is reasonable to suppose that Archer is the nearest approximation to the writer-figure in the novel. Detective Perry Dart is Archer’s social and intellectual inferior, as their names suggest, yet, when Dart is with his own men, “there was no doubt as to who was in command” (8). They are such a well-matched pair that Fisher used them again in a short story published a month after his early death, “John Archer’s Nose”, so called because it turns on Archer’s acute sense of smell as well as his detective skills.

Archer points out to Dart in The Conjure Man Dies the similarity of their professions:

All my training and all my activities are those of a detective. The criminal I chase is as prime a rascal as you’ll ever find. Diseases are assailants, thieves, murderers. In each case I get, it’s my job to track disease down, identify it, and arrest it. What else is diagnosis and treatment? (124)

Typical of Archer is the pun on arrest, and typical of Fisher is the sly allusion to his reversal of the Holmes-Doctor Watson partnership, in Archer’s addressing of Dart as “my dear Sherlock” (“John Archer’s Nose”, 158). Fisher here also emphasizes their male companionship by identifying them as a pair of bachelors (“John Archer’s Nose”, 158), and I would argue that it is in these two partnerships, of Bubber Brown and Jinx Jenkins,
and of Perry Dart and John Archer, with their suggestion of African American solidarity at home, that the interest of his novel lies. I cannot agree with John McCluskey, Jr. that Frimbo emerges “as the most interesting character in the tale” (McCluskey xxxiii). Even McCluskey says that “the African past as rendered through Frimbo’s memory appears over-romanticized” (xxxv); in fact it is rather dull, either because Fisher had no firsthand knowledge of it or no real emotional commitment to it or both.

Stephen F. Soitos says of the house that is the principal setting of the novel that there is a swinging black and white sign that advertises both an undertaker and a spiritualist. The house stands for the divided African American people torn in two directions, one leading to their black roots in the African past and the other toward the Euro-Americentric values manifested by the culture in which they live (Soitos 107).

However, Soitos’s argument that the sign divides into basement versus top floor, undertaker versus spiritualist, and murder versus redefinition of the African past “by way of a highly spiritualized consciousness” does not quite work. First of all, there is not one black and white sign; there are two signs, one black-on-white sign for the undertaker on the left, and one silver-on-onyx sign for N. Frimbo, Psychist on the right. The fact that the undertaker’s sign is “like a footnote” (2) not only implies that even though death comes as the end, it is paid relatively little attention, but is also Fisher’s covert reference to his unobtrusive murderer. Secondly, the basement doubles as the location of Frimbo’s death-centred activity of burning the body of his servant (147). Thirdly, the undertaker is himself connected to “a highly spiritualized consciousness” through the use of his meeting-room for church meetings on Sundays (146). More importantly, the undertaker’s corpses stored in the house and Frimbo’s African relics are depicted as equally sinister; both must have inspired the contemporary verdict on the novel: “It gives me the creeps and the shudders” (Hansen 23). Frimbo is at his most compelling when he “reads” Archer’s early struggles to become a doctor (132), affording an insight into the contemporary United States, not Africa; otherwise he is useful to the plot as a particularly mysterious “child of the night”, who claims to be able to rise from the dead. Frimbo himself attributes his ability to predict the future only to his powers of deduction, since he claims that people’s futures are inevitable given their past experiences, which he sees written on their faces (41). What, then, is written on Archer’s face, who, after practicing as a doctor for nearly ten years, is still paying back the debts he has incurred during his medical training, (132) is, as Frimbo says, “... the resentment you feel at this moment against your inability to do what you are mentally equipped to do” (133).

There is therefore something bitterly ironic about Archer’s diagnosis of Frimbo as “a very special kind of nut” because he is paranoid about the racism he has suffered in the United States. This is brought out clearly in Archer’s exchange with Dart. Archer explains that Frimbo had a delusion of persecution because he found it difficult to get into college, and Dart asks, “Where’s the delusion in that?” Archer gives a thoroughly inadequate answer, which both Archer and Fisher must have known to be inadequate (even the wording of it being rather clumsy):

The delusion in that is that plenty of students the same color, but with more satisfactory formal preparation, have no such difficulty. Also that plenty the same color with unsatisfactory preparation don’t draw the same conclusion. And also that plenty without his generous inheritance of pigment and with unsatisfactory preparation have the same difficulty and don’t draw the same conclusion. Dart certainly finds this inadequate, and responds, “Call it a delusion if you want to...” (152-153).
Archer’s refusal to give credence to a racism which he must certainly have known existed sheds light on an earlier exchange between Frimbo and Archer, in which they are discussing the causes of Frimbo’s “death”, which he suddenly claims to be of very little importance:

> ... Presently Frimbo added in an almost bitter murmur: “The rest of the world would do better to concern itself with why Frimbo was black.”
> Dr. Archer shook hands and departed (136).

Archer’s silent handshake and immediate departure signal a covert assent to Frimbo’s proposition but a refusal to engage with it. It is possible, however, to overemphasize a highly developed degree of African American consciousness in the novel at the expense of its artistry as a detective story: for example, Crouch boasts of his skill in treating the complexions of corpses, commenting, “… We can make the dark ones bright and the bright ones lighter, that seems to be the ambition in this community…” (56). We may be distracted, by this insight into an internalized racism, from realizing that Crouch has given us an important clue that he has the skill to change his “smooth, unblemished” face (52) into the light brown face spattered with black freckles of “Easley Jones” (77), whom he impersonates.

Similarly, we should be distrustful of the observation that there is absolutely no use of four-letter words and no sex. Fisher, like Du Bois and other New Negro authors, believed in putting one’s best foot forward. There were some things that one just did not parade for the white folks to see (Davis, 103).

Firstly, this assumes that Fisher was dominated by a consciousness of white readers, and secondly, it echoes Dart’s statement to Archer, “But sex has played no part in this picture” (172). Sex is the motive for Frimbo’s final murder, and so Fisher is naturally trying to steer us away from it, even though he does risk a daring double-bluff in the scene in which Archer and Dart inspect Frimbo’s bedroom and note the lack of frills, perfume, and photographs of women. This lack leads Dart to conclude, “Woman hater”, but Archer adds, “Or a Lothario of the deepest dye” (15). Even here, we may be diverted from the truth, that Frimbo has been having an affair with a married woman, which will lead to his death, by Dart’s response, “I get the deep dye, he was blacker’n me.” (15)

In a masterly way Fisher also discloses the key to the mystery on the very first page, in the words of “the moment’s most popular song”, heard on Harlem’s Seventh Avenue:

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I'll be glad when you're dead, you rascal you
I'll be glad when you're dead, you rascal you
What is it that you've got
Makes my wife think you so hot?
0 you dog, I’ll be glad when you’re gone! (1)
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This song is heard again later in the story, sung by a girl in a nightclub, with what Fisher wittily calls “an irrelevance which no one seemed to mind” (63), or, to put it another way, a relevance which no one seems to notice. The song frames the novel, for it reappears on the last page, and our attention is drawn to its significance by Bubber Brown in the last spoken words of the story (186) as Fisher congratulates himself on his own ingenuity.

It is clear from Martha Crouch’s exclamation at the end of the novel that she has loved Frimbo passionately (185), although of course this is a passion which Fisher, as a detective story writer, is bound to conceal. Though Davis is technically correct that there is “no sex” in the novel, it does include the murder of a man on a sexual pretext, the real motive being the rivalry between two gambling syndicates (114, 122), an illicit encounter with a
young woman described by the onlooker, Bubber, as looking “ike she was gettin’ ready to try on a bathin’ suit and meant to have a perfect fit” (31), and the appearance of an extremely sexy girl in a nightclub:

Her flame chiffon dress, normally long and flowing, had been caught up bit by bit in her palms, which rested nonchalantly on her hips, until now it was not so much a dress as a sash, gathered about her waist. The long, shapely, smooth brown limbs below were bare from trim slippers to sash, and only a bit of silken underwear stood between her modesty and surrounding admiration. (62)

Bernard W. Bell calls The Conjure Man Dies “an incongruous combination of mystery and low comedy” (Bell, 141), but it is perhaps an even more incongruous combination of mystery, comedy, sexuality, and subdued social comment; action of the text is often parodied within it, as when Bubber seems to imitate Frimbo in rising from the dead, but it is in comic dialogue that Fisher excels. Bubber and Jinx may appeal to white readers as entertainers, but they are not presented as stupid, but rather as witty and ingenious; Bubber is “superstitious but street-wise” (Soitos, 104), and the repartee in which he indulges with Jinx, far from being boring to a modern reader, is now recognized as an art form. With Frimbo and Archer, Fisher has done far more than simply make the faces black, as Chester Himes once put it (Rabinowitz, 19), but has produced a detective partnership unexpectedly complex and subversive for a novel of 1932, and with Bubber and Jinx a relationship unexpectedly poignant.

Fisher’s characters exhibit a constant consciousness of their blackness, whether seriously, sensuously, or humorously. Africa, however, is seen as other, sinister, and threatening as a source of racial discontent. John Archer, the chief authority figure in the novel, and the character who most nearly approaches Fisher himself, has, indeed, decided against racial discontent, which is triply subdued in Frimbo’s (unanswered) “almost bitter murmur”, as uttered by a character stigmatized as mad, as only approaching bitterness, and as a tentative suggestion. It may be that in the sequel Fisher had begun at the time of his death, Thus Spake the Prophet (McCluskey xxxvi), the murmur would have become a little louder. In The Conjure Man Dies it is a disturbing eddy beneath the surface of a very accomplished detective novel.

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Rudolph Fisher, in *The Conjure Man Dies* (1932), does not treat the traditional African American motif of passing, although he does treat disguise. Very unusually for a text of this period, he manages to integrate a highly developed degree of African American consciousness into a very accomplished detective story.

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Ishmael Reed’s Use of Detective Novel Prototypes

Yves Bonnemère

1 In Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down, the central character, the Loop Garoo Kid says that a novel “can be anything it wants to be, a vaudeville show, the six o’clock news, the mumblings of wild men saddled by demons” (YB, 40). If one applies Reed’s aesthetic theory to the detective novel, the latter is only a starting-point, a structure, a formula.

2 Elements of mystery stories, of classical and hard-boiled detective novels are resorted to for the writer to convey his own views of culture and religion. His purpose is not to hold the reader in suspense or to entertain him for the mere sake of entertainment. He often uses parody and satire because they are his religious and cultural weapons. In Reed’s work, gang warfare takes on world-wide dimensions. It illustrates two contending principles that have been at war for hundreds of centuries, and the Egyptian legend of Osiris and Seth is the founding myth underlying this world war.

3 Reed borrows elements from detective novels but doesn’t really write detective novels in so far as he doesn’t stick to standard formulas. For instance, a character like the Loop Garoo Kid appears in a comic epic, Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down. The action is set in the Wild West. The novel itself is a take-off of conventional westerns, of yellow backs. It features the Loop Garoo Kid, an avenger defending the oppressed —children and black people— against the rich and adults (Drag, a cattle baron and the inhabitants of Yellow Back Radio). Unlike western heroes who use their guns, Loop Garoo triumphs over the villains thanks to his hoodoo powers only. He defends the same cause as PaPa LaBas in Mumbo Jumbo, Reed’s closest book to a detective novel. Like the black cowboy, PaPa LaBas is the writer’s spokesman though he isn’t an avenger but a houngan (a hoodoo priest in Haïti) and jacklegged detective both in Mumbo Jumbo and The Last Days of Louisiana Red. He voices the hoodoo counter-tradition whose champion the author is.

4 Set in the 1920s, in the days of prohibition, Mumbo Jumbo refers to gang warfare at that time, and urban violence reminds us of Dashiell Hammett portraying corruption in American cities in his hard-boiled detective novels. A black character, Bud Jackson, has control over speakeasies in Harlem and is involved in fights against white gangsters. Biff
Musclewhite, an ex-policeman with racist ideas and nominally curator of a famous New York Art Museum is actually a hired killer. He works for people heading white secret societies such as the Wallflower Order and its military organization, the Knights Templar whose leader is Hinckle Von Vampton, a defender of western values, and of the white man’s law and order. These white societies hire dubious characters who resist or attack the symptoms of “Jes Grew”, a black cultural and religious (hoodoo) movement in the twenties, in the Jazz Age.

Starting from New Orleans, the Mecca of African American polytheism (hoodoo), Jes Grew, through music and dancing, spreads to the whole of the USA. White authorities are afraid lest Jes Grew should undermine white values and get the better of white-dominated American culture. The Wallflower Order and one of the major characters in Mumbo Jumbo —Von Vampton, Labas’s opponent— try to curb the power of Jes Grew and fight against dancing, music, jazz, the Harlem Renaissance, etc. Von Vampton has recourse to a variety of means: first, murder, that of Abdul Hamid, a Black Muslim, second the press: as the editor of The Sun, a New York paper, he defends Atonism, Reed’s word for monotheism, against the revival of hoodoo (polytheism) in the U. S. A. Third, he wages a cultural war: he acts as if he were interested in black artists and writers but he creates a black Android (“Safecracker” Gould, a white man disguised in blackface and who passes himself off as a black poet). His purpose is to undermine and put an end to Jes Grew’s power considered as a threat to the white man’s power and culture. Fourth, Von Vampton wants to retrieve the Jes Grew text, a sacred text, stolen by Moses, hidden in Solomon’s Temple (later on, the Templars’ headquarters). Hinckle Von Vampton, who is hundreds of years old, found it centuries ago in Jerusalem. The text is supposed to be a book written by Thoth, the patron of scribes in Egypt. It contains the essence of Osirian rites (polytheism). Reversing stereotypes, Reed portrays Von Vampton (a one-eyed man) and his companions as robbers, pirates, not only of things but also of black culture. Metaphorically, he is the vampire (Vampton) endeavouring to drain black Americans of their blood and of their distinctive culture.

Confronting Von Vampton is PaPa LaBas, a figure close to the Haitian god Legba (or Eshu), a messenger between our world and the supernatural world. Like Hinckle, he is also in search of The Book of Thoth. He thinks he needs it for Jes Grew to fulfil its mission, for black culture to prevail. Like the detectives of classical detective stories, he makes use of reasoning and deduction and, after managing to decode a secret message, finds out The Book of Thoth under the Cotton Club in Harlem. Yet, he is unlike a Hercule Poirot because he also combines ratiocination with his occult knowledge, voyance. He is a voodoo priest at the head of the Mumbo Jumbo Cathedral and his hoodoo powers give him an insight into the problems he has to solve. Hoodoo helps him along with his inquiries.

Although he is a central character in Mumbo Jumbo, he doesn’t always act on his own. He works with Haitians (one of whom is Benoit Battraville) fighting against the American occupation of Haiti in the days of the Harlem Renaissance. If LaBas appears for the first time in Mumbo Jumbo, he reappears in The Last Days of Louisiana Red, this time to fight against discord among blacks on the West Coast in the 1960s. Louisiana Red embodies the evil forces disrupting the black community. Reed refers here to Marxist-influenced groups like the Black Panthers in the 60s. He calls them Moochers since he regards them as spongers, parasites. LaBas’s role is to investigate them and also to support the Work, an organization whose proponents defend hoodoo knowledge, a remedy whose healing
power is supposed to cure the black community, to ward off the evil which besets it and to restore order and harmony among the blacks.

8 So, all these remarks about some of Reed’s novels emphasize the fact that his fiction bears little resemblance to standard detective novels. Actually, detective novel formulas help him to depict and reconstruct various periods of American history from the black man’s point of view. The characters he uses are more types or archetypes than true-to-life characters.

9 Robbers, pirates, perverts are recurrent characters so far as whites are concerned, and most of the time, he makes use of irony or its black version, signifying, to expose the white man’s cowardice in hilarious passages that entertain the reader more than suspense does. Nevertheless, irony isn’t only used to make us laugh but also to indict and satirize the white man’s power and culture, and also to deliver a message. The novelist’s aim is to assert the power of African American culture, a counter-culture, as superior to white culture. However, Reed makes the most of a white author to achieve his purpose, I mean Edgar Allan Poe. He often does a pastiche of parts of Poe’s tales. For instance, he is indebted to him for his parodic imitation of the atmosphere of Gothic novels when depicting the South in Flight to Canada. Some characters like Raven Quickskill or Lenore, Alfred’s fiancée, in The Free-Lance Pallbearers, are echoes of Poe’s “The Raven”. Besides, themes like perversity and depravity recur in each of Reed’s novels to characterize his villains, whites like Drag, the cattle baron in Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down, Swille the Southern planter in Flight to Canada, Harry Sam, the president in The Free-Lance Pallbearers. One may trace the literary influence of the theme of depravity back to Poe’s Imp of the Perverse, although Reed also connects it with the myth of Seth, the Egyptian god embodying death and evil. So, when Reed plays up the Egyptian heritage of black Americans, one may not see the influence of white authors in his work and at times, he appears to be a trickster attempting to outwit his reader.

10 This is the case with The Gold Bug. In The Free-Lance Pallbearers, U2 Polyglot carries on his research on Kafka’s Metamorphosis pushing a ball of dung with his long nose. U2 Polyglot isn’t unlike the sacred scarab, a symbol of eternal life in Ancient Egypt. Although Egypt plays a major part in Reed’s work and message, here he has most likely drawn his inspiration from Poe’s The Gold Bug. The capture of a scarab involving the discovery of a piece of parchment with a message to decode leads to a treasure hidden in a tree. Here, we aren’t far removed from the discovery, underneath the Cotton Club, of the box supposed to contain the Book of Thoth. Another example is most interesting. In The Murders in the Rue Morgue, the murderer is an orangutang, so is Hamadryas in The Last Days of Louisiana Red. As a telepath endowed with foresight, he helps the houngan detective LaBas until he kills one of the New York zoo keepers. As far as his characterization is concerned, Hamadryas does make us think of the orangutang in The Murders of the Rue Morgue, but also of Thoth, the baboon-faced Egyptian god, the god of knowledge and wisdom. Therefore, we can notice that two traditions merge in the same character: the white one and the black one. Through pastiche and parody, Poe’s work enables Ishmael Reed to develop his verve as a satirist and also to refer to two main cultural and literary currents in American culture. Reed’s detective novels appear to be modern moralities. They teach us lessons through irony and satire.

11 The writer’s purpose is to debunk the myths that justify the white man’s power. In Reed’s work, history and fiction enable the reader to make out the major features of white men but the novelist’s aim differs from the historian’s in that he doesn’t endeavor to be
“objective” in picturing the past. Actually, he resorts to laughter, a weapon against the white community. Above all, Reed is a satirist whose art is based on a reassessment of white history and culture. Yet, he doesn't overlook the white literary tradition (Poe’s work for instance) but he makes the most of popular genres such as the detective novel or the western.

Polytheism in the guise of the Loop Garoo Kid challenges and overthrows the white man’s economic power in Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down. Drag, the cattle baron, a character that brings Lucifer to mind partly because his abode is actually Hell, is sent to his death by the black cowboy who casts his spells upon him. Christianity is doomed to fail too: the preacher with his hazel stick is powerless and ridiculed by the Loop Garoo Kid. So is the Pope. Roles are reversed and hoodoo disrupts the very foundations of the white man’s economic and religious power. In Mumbo Jumbo, Ishmael Reed goes on with the good fight. PaPa LaBas outwits the white villains’ plans. The latter pretend to befriend black people to destroy them. Von Vampton, Biff Musclewhite, Safeckracker Gould are impostors whose one and only interest is to fight on behalf of the white man’s supremacy. PaPa LaBas’s supernatural powers inherited from his Nigerian ancestors enable him to defeat his white enemies. If his fight is based on African American tradition, other struggles have the same aim and some subplots flesh out the whole novel. The Mutafikahs want to return African art to its cradle, to free it from the “centres of art detention” (i.e. American and European museums) because art can’t be cut off from its religious roots. As for the Abdul Hamid episode, it illustrates the dangers that the black community has to face. Islam, one more version of Atonism (monotheism) is a threat to Jes Grew and black culture, and so are Marxism and Christianity.

Throughout his work, Reed resorts to satire when portraying two conflicting groups who fight each other on racial or religious grounds. Actually, these groups embody two conflicting principles: good (the black man) at war against evil (the white man). Such a binary opposition also discloses a fight between polytheism and monotheism, called Atonism in Mumbo Jumbo in reference to Aton, Amenophis IV’s or Akhenaton’s unique God, the Sun God in Ancient Egypt. Amenophis IV is notoriously famous since he made up his mind to get rid of the ancient Egyptian gods and is considered as the founder of monotheism.

Ishmael Reed casts a critical and ironical look at the white man’s civilization as a whole. The history of western civilization is represented as a mere war of gangs and secret societies. In Mumbo Jumbo, Reed deals with America in the twenties, the days of prohibition. Gangs of killers like Al Capone’s fought one another to corner the underground market of liquor. In those gangland killings, the writer doesn’t only see a phenomenon caused by urbanisation but also an age-old struggle. The fight between the black, Buddy Jackson, and the white beer baron, Schlitz (MJ, 20) is part of a conflict between rival gangs which also changes into a world war between two antinomic worldviews, one based on polytheism, the other on Atonism. That is why in Mumbo Jumbo, Ishmael Reed can be said to extend the concepts of space and time. His novel refers to a struggle affecting the whole world, “a struggle between secret societies” (MJ, 19-20).

In this fight between two contending principles, the whites appear to be shameless murderers spreading disorder and violence though they claim to be the advocates of reason. Referring to the Greeks, Reed says ironically: “the Athenians were so rational, so civilized they had to have a reason for everything, including barbarity” (LR, 70). The author contrasts white ethnocentrism based on supposedly universal reason with a view
of the world from a hoodoo angle. On purpose, he passes from one form of ethnocentrism on to another form of ethnocentrism.

Instead of the stereotyped view that the white man has of black people, Reed offers a counter-vision of the whites which is as stereotyped as theirs. The whites force a set of rules and values upon white culture which is supposed to be the norm of all cultures. Significantly, Biff Musclewhite, the curator of a famous New York museum in *Mumbo Jumbo*, is also a policeman—which can be interpreted as the white man imposing his views and standards upon other cultures. A Christian military organization, the Knights Templar, plays the part of a “Tac Squad for Western Civilization” (*MJ*, 63). The Judeo-Christian tradition, Atonism to use Reed’s word, means uniformity. It tends to level cultural differences when they are man’s richness. In *Mumbo Jumbo*, Von Vampton, who embodies the white man’s order, goes so far as to revolt against colours (*MJ*, 160). As for feelings, white civilization expresses them with restraint, hypocrisy the writer seems to say ironically when mentioning Moses’ “mother crying, civilized, dignified, not the piercing wailing from the viscera associated with the mourning Isis” (*MJ*, 212).

Using a lot of shady characters in his detective novels, Reed depicts white men as killers, robbers, plunderers making havoc of all that Christian civilization disapproves of. The invasion of Haiti by American troops from the South illustrates this viewpoint. Soldiers destroy hoodoo temples (*MJ*, 155-156). When Reed portrays the white community in a stereotyped manner, he exposes the way white people caricature and judge African Americans, but when he describes the white man as a killer and a robber he also reverses the Anglo-Saxon clichés and stereotyped views of the blacks. This is how Reed holds the white man’s civilizing mission up to ridicule, white people being supposed to have brought light to the blacks living in the darkness of ignorance. The author’s criticism is all the harsher as it shows that the whites—who claim a prestigious heritage: that of the Greeks and the Romans—are largely influenced by Ancient Egypt. According to Reed’s thesis, quite close to Sheikh Anta Diop’s, Egypt is not only the cradle of black civilizations but also the cradle of all civilizations, including western civilization. So, the prestige of Judeo-Christianity is belittled. Moses and Christ join the camp of robbers, liars, traitors, impostors (*MJ*, 206, 213).

If through such criticism, the novelist denounces the Judeo-Christian myth of brotherhood, a form of ideology justifying impostures and centuries of exploitation, he isn’t lenient toward some historical theories underlying modern Utopias. White history is debunked. Its self-proclaimed grandeur is played down. Reed sees it as gang warfare, and neither does he regard class struggle as the driving force of history. He considers that Marxism is highly influenced by the period of history which produced it. Therefore, it is outdated. So, no wonder if in *Mumbo Jumbo* laughter welcomes Woodrow Wilson Jefferson, when he tries to meet Marx and Engels in the 1920s!

To do away with old or modern myths still alive in Western civilization, Reed refers to the founding myth of Ancient Egypt, a myth which underlies the set of themes found throughout his work. That is why the writer often portrays white characters as people looking alike, as if they were built on the same pattern. Actually, the author wants to demonstrate that the whites are all descendants from or avatars of the Egyptian god Seth. The latter was the rival and the murderer of his brother Osiris. He was often depicted as an animal, a wolf or a dog. He was the devil whereas his brother Osiris, the anthropomorphic god par excellence, looked close to nature and life.
So, Reed’s characterization depends on this mythic rivalry, an opposition between animal and man, anti-nature and nature, death and life. One could have thought that the author’s characters were influenced by American history. They aren’t. For instance, white characters are no different from each other because they are nothing but variations on Seth’s personality, the accursed god of Ancient Egypt. Osiris, the ancestor of black people, symbolized fertility, fecundity and life whereas Seth embodied sterility, war, death, homosexuality, evil.

The personalities of white people aren’t really accounted for historically but mythically. The satanic traits of Swille in *Flight to Canada*, of Drag in *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* and of Harry Sam in *The Free-Lance Pallbearers* are patterned on the god Seth. Thus, to condemn Western civilization and make his criticism all the harsher, Ishmael Reed resorts to a very old though very prestigious civilization. The portrait that the author draws of the white man is legitimized by an age-old myth. Man is no longer the white man, but the black man because he is descended from a black god, Osiris, whereas the white man’s ancestor is nothing but a god looking like an animal. Therefore, the Judeo-Christian civilization’s claim to superiority isn’t justified. White tradition is ridiculed, since the white man is part of the animal kingdom.

Reversing the usual stereotypes related to Ham’s sons, cursed for ever, Ishmael Reed changes the white man into the member of an accursed family, for ever doomed to depravity. The white man becomes the very picture of perversity and Seth ranks first among perverts. As far as the black man is concerned, the line of descent goes from Osiris in Egypt, to Dionysius in Greece, to voodoo gods in Haiti, to Umbanda in Brazil and, finally, hoodoo gods in the U.S.A. Referring to hoodoo thought, in *The Last Days of Louisiana Red*, Reed portrays the Moochers (Marxist-influenced revolutionaries not unlike Black Power members on the West Coast in the 1960s) as victims or users of black magic worshipping petro deities just like Marie Laveau, a New Orleans mambo (hoodoo priestess). LaBas’s part as a detective is to fight against the forces of disorder that the Moochers represent. As a houngan (hoodoo priest), he practices the rada rites (white magic) to counter the Moochers’ violence and their evil, harmful influence. Descended from John the Conqueror, Marie Laveau’s adversary, LaBas applies the Workers’ principles. In other words, he acts according to the teachings contained in *The Book of Thoth*, the blacks’ Bible (The Jes Grew Text in *Mumbo Jumbo*). This is the only way according to PaPa LaBas and Reed, whose spokesman he is, to free the African Americans from the white man’s cultural, religious and political domination.

As we know, in *The Last Days of Louisiana Red* and more particularly in *Mumbo Jumbo*, a cultural fight based on music, dancing and literature conceals and reveals a religious struggle. Jes Grew spreading to the whole of America refers to something deeper than a cultural movement: the confrontation between whites and white-influenced blacks on the one hand, and hoodoo followers on the other hand goes back to an age-old war between polytheism and monotheism.

The local struggle between African Americans and white Americans takes on a worldwide dimension. Atonism (white power in *Mumbo Jumbo*) tries to force its laws upon polytheistic civilizations. According to Reed, secret societies such as Christian orders (The Knights Templar, The Wallflower Order in *Mumbo Jumbo*) have fought for thousands of years against polytheism which will keep on resisting Christianity and Islam, and overcome them. In *Mumbo Jumbo*, Von Vampton is hundreds of years old. He is some kind of archetype, an allegory of the whites’ cultural and economic domination. Portrayed as a
pirate, in medieval times he lost an eye in a crusade against the Infidels, Islam. He is the one who endeavors to deprive the blacks of their cultural and religious riches. Long ago, he found the Book of Thoth which had been hidden in Solomon's Temple by Moses. Resorting to his magazine, *The Benign Monster* and a Talking Android he does his utmost to chase Jes Grew away from the U. S. A. but to no avail. He fails at the end of *Mumbo Jumbo* when he is arrested by Haitians representing hoodoo law and order, and taken to Haiti to be tried. Clues against him are numerous enough. He will be charged with conspiracy against hoodoo cultural and religious values. Reed depicts Von Vampton as an inheritor of Akhenaton (Amenophis IV) and his wife Nefertiti. Akhenaton, an Egyptian pharaoh who reigned from 1379 to 1362 BC. So, he lived more than three thousand years ago. He established a new religion centered on Aton, the Sun god (hence Atonism in Reed's work) and rejected polytheism and the ancient Egyptian gods. Akhenaton's attempt at forcing monotheism upon his people was a failure. Ancient Egyptian gods were worshipped again by his successors.

25 Akhenaton is the ancestor of monotheistic religions: Judaism, Christianity, Islam and even Marxism, according to Reed who reverses the usual stereotypes related to Ham's sons. The white man will fail because of the curse that is put on him. He is descended from Seth. Osiris's brother and murderer embodies the forces of disruption and death whereas his brother represents natural forces and life. Seth, with his wolf-like head, is half human, half animal whereas Osiris is the anthropomorphic god whose descendants are the blacks. Thus, two conflicting forms of religion and civilization result from the myth of Osiris and Seth. The whites, together with the Greeks and the Romans are the heirs of Seth and Apollo whereas the blacks are the inheritors of Osiris and Dionysius. So, Reed has managed to prove the cultural and religious superiority of the blacks and of the African Americans over the whites. Such superiority is legitimized by the myth of Osiris, Seth and Isis.

26 Monotheism and polytheism can be traced back to the Osirian mysteries containing both positive and negative aspects. The rada rites of voodoo (and hoodoo, its North American form) are an offshoot of the Osirian rites whereas monotheism was initiated by Moses who robbed Isis of The Book of Thoth (the Osirian mysteries) when she was in her petro (evil) aspect, hence she passed on her occult knowledge with her left hand (or black magic). So, Moses and Christians have only known the Bible, a distorted version, a left hand version of the Book of Thoth. Therefore, Christianity and all forms of monotheism are mere superstitions.

27 In conclusion, Ishmael Reed's use of detective novel prototypes serves his purpose as a committed writer, committed to polytheism. He is a trickster who makes use of the detective novel and various elements of it in his work to entertain his readers and convert them to his views of polytheism. At times, he takes off Poe and resorts to pastiche and parody for comic effect, but he also delivers a cultural and religious message. African American culture and religion are the heirs of the prestigious Egyptian civilization. Black Egypt is the cradle of civilization. Greek and Roman cultures, western civilizations are nothing but subcultures, minor offshoots of Ancient Egypt.
Works Cited


NOTES

1. The following abbreviations have been used for referencing purposes: YB for *Yellow Back Radio Broke Down*, LR for *The Last Days of Louisiana Red*, FC for *Flight to Canada*, and MJ for *Mumbo Jumbo*.

ABSTRACTS

Ishmael Reed uses detective novel prototypes to debunk white men’s “superiority”. Gang warfare depicts an age-old worldwide fight between polytheism and monotheism. Based on the founding myth of ancient Egypt, white men are portrayed as the heirs of Seth, an animal-like god, whereas black men resemble Osiris, Seth’s brother, the anthropomorphic god. Reversing the stereotypes attached to Ham’s sons, Reed turns white men into the members of an accursed family, forever doomed to depravity and perversity.

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Dismantling the Detective Story: Chester Himes’s Ideological Stand in *A Case of Rape*

Françoise Clary

1 The first thing readers are likely to notice about Chester Himes’s *A Case of Rape*, a short, pungent, paradoxical and romantic detective story, is the contrast between the realism of the characterization and background and the sensationalism of the plot. Chester Himes should be regarded as the poet of the city. In this crime story, the settings give an impression of personal involvement with the Paris cityscape. Thus, from the start, readers are immersed in the Latin Quarter, more precisely in the area between the Odéon and the Panthéon. They can picture the protagonists wandering through the city streets, such as the rue Monsieur le Prince, imagine Mrs. Hancock having a cup of coffee and Scott Hamilton drinking beer at the terrace of the café Monaco. Readers can also have a broader view of Paris and visualize the protagonists driving to Montmartre, attending a performance at the Grand-Guignol, rue Chaptal close to the Place Pigalle, then heading for Le Lido, avenue des Champs Élysées. The various characters evolve in the Paris experience – from the Latin Quarter to Montmartre or from a small hotel room rue Cujas to the luxurious hotel George V– fitting perfectly into the city’s life. Certainly what is to be stressed is that the various characters get colour and conviction from their surroundings: it is enough to evoke Cesar Gee with his flashy yellow Cadillac in the smart area of hotel George V and the avenue des Champs Élysées or Theodore Elkins coming out of the Sorbonne. This feeling is strengthened by the fact that the protagonists of *A Case of Rape* seem to be springing out of the background. In fact, the dividing line between character and background is not always clear and the reversal of the two can occur with a resultant surprise effect in a detective fiction where the story of the investigation is made gradually to uncover the story of the crime. Thus, the importance of Scott Hamilton and Elizabeth Hancock’s love affair on the Riviera, from the point of view of the art of fiction, is that it establishes the precedent for the detective story in which the denouement determines the order and causality of all that precedes.
There is something more to be said about the functional significance of the surroundings. Chester Himes's detective story is constructed of progressive and digressive elements which are at the same time concentrated and diffuse. It may not be true that life imitates art as Oscar Wilde suggested, but all literature takes colour from its social surroundings and at the same time imparts these surroundings a further element of meaning. In Chester Himes's *A Case of Rape*, actualization of the virtual opens up the possibility for the reader to gradually unravel the hidden story of the crime –in other words, to find “the answer” (which is potentiality present in the formulated problems of the text). As suspense involves the experience of suspension with sequences that remain unfinished, negativity embraces both the question and the answer in the step-by-step process of inquiry. The need for the relief from tension, in the unresolved and therefore suspenseful situation of this short detective story, is the condition that enables the reader to construct the meaning of the text on a question-and-answer basis.

It is this writing process that endows the meaning of *A Case of Rape* with its unique quality. Chester Himes’s art of fiction does not consist in giving a determinate solution to the determinate problems posed. It is, rather, the transformation of events into the discovery of the cause. Meaning (such as derived from the exposure of racial prejudices) thus emerges as the reverse side of what the text of the detective story depicts: a white woman victimized and raped by black men. The world of the text appears in a state of alienation, and this alienation effect indicates that meaning is potentially there. As a consequence, meaning coincides with the emergence of the reverse side of the represented world (the mysterious murder of a white American woman supposedly abused by American blacks in her hotel room, rue Cujas in the Latin Quarter). Here we see the twofold structure of negativity (embodied in violence and racism). It is noteworthy in this connection that Chester Himes’s art of writing is linked to the calculation of effects of suspense –mainly the suspense derived from the repeated postponement of the resolution of rival investigations. This constitutes a narrative device of “retardation on the level of the action” which Viktor Shklovsky refers to as “the fundamental law of peripeteia [...] the breaking of recognition” (Shklovsky 1973, 48).

In addition to this, another device employed in *A Case of Rape* is related to the story’s structure. We observe that in the process of telling one tale, Himes’s detective story uncovers another tale. While Himes purports to narrate the course of an investigation, the conspicuous story of the investigation gradually reveals the hidden story of the crime. In short, the initial crime on which the tale of detection is predicated can be considered as an end as well as a beginning in so far as it brings the hidden story –that of the events that have led to Mrs. Hancock’s death– to a close at the same time as it initiates another story, namely the process of uncovering the cause of the crime. This narrative technique is reminiscent of what can be read in Raymond Chandler’s notes about the detective story:

In its essence the crime story is simple. It consists of two stories. One is known only to the criminal and to the author himself. It is usually simple, consisting chiefly of the commission of a murder and the criminal's attempts to cover up after it.... The other story is the story which is told. It is capable of great elaboration and should, when finished, be complete in itself. It is necessary, however, to connect the two stories throughout the book. This is done by allowing a bit, here and there, of the hidden story to appear. (MacShane 1976, 42)
In *A Case of Rape*, as in traditional detective novels, the readers are faced with the repeated postponement of the apparent approach to a solution. What, then, makes Himes’s own story distinct from other similar forms of literature? As a matter of fact, the character-and-background relationship is a basic structure in *A Case of Rape* by means of which the strategies of the text produce a tension that sets off a series of different actions and interactions. What is combined within the text is a whole system of perspectives that include the narrator’s and the characters’ as well as that of the plot, and the one marked out for the reader. All of these are subtly interwoven, offering a constantly shifting constellation of views. Indeed, as perspectives are continually interweaving and interacting, it is not possible readers to embrace all perspectives at once, and so the view they are taken with at any one particular moment is what constitutes for them the temporary ‘theme’ of the detective story. Now the several views are not purely optional. Clues have to be provided and it is necessary for readers to draw from them rational and inevitable conclusions to get the ‘right’ perspective, that is to say the one intended by Chester Himes. Thus, while getting concerned with the conducts of Elizabeth Hancock and Scott Hamilton, readers are gradually conditioned by the horizon of past attitudes toward the main protagonists, whether it be from the point of view of the narrator, from that of the other characters, or from that of the plot. The main question is therefore to know how readers can cope with the simultaneous contexts since any conclusion reached purely by instinct, or through accident, would show a failure on the part of Chester Himes, the author, and be unfair to his readers.

What we have, in *A Case of Rape*, is, in fact, context within context. For instance, we come across a white woman with four black men in a small hotel room in the midst of the Latin Quarter, in the Paris area, in France, in Europe—which suggests hypotheses regarding the value system of places where race relations develop freely. Each context has therefore the quality of hermetic language, that is a language that can be decoded and known. In the elaboration of this process, however, the reader builds up a sense that there are loan words, as well as a grammar of juxtaposed, third person sentences conveying feelings of impersonality. A description of these becomes the formal definition of a system contrived to baffle the reader. That is why Himes’s influence on the direction taken by the detective story is important with respect to the narrator’s’s ideological conception of literature and its function. His own aesthetics is clearly a combination of philosophic idealism and a hostility to racist attitudes in all spheres. The main interest of Himes’s crime story is undoubtedly that it derives from a realist’s concern to explore the circumstances of less than average life as well as the preoccupations with the dark side of the soul without forgetting the ironic matter-of-factness linking the effects of suspense to the step-by-step process of rational enquiry. How, then, are facts made relevant for the dynamic interaction between text and reader that occurs during the reading process?

The communicatory process, that occurs in the transfer of the text to the reader, is initiated by the text that establishes itself as a correlative in the reader’s consciousness, in so far as it offers a frame within which the reader must construct for himself a structured act of comprehension. Thus, we can observe in *A Case of Rape* that the syntactic units of sentences include a repeated use of passive forms to refer to the protagonists’ actions. Impersonal constructions are used to indicate what befalls the various characters, together with verbs denoting some kind of perception (“hear, see, feel, know”) which reflect the scrutinizing process of the inquiry. As to passages in reported speech, they provide complementary details about the protagonists. All of these units are
juxtaposed without any real interpenetration within a uniform, third-person narrative contributing thereby to heighten the impersonal tone of the text through the introduction of a mood of deliberate coldness. The accumulation of short, precise, unemotional, almost “scientific” remarks looks like a product of ‘collage-montage’ reinforcing the effect of puzzlement as the main object of the book. Somehow, sentences, though set side by side, go in diverse ways to form semantic units of a higher order, exhibiting structures whose components are: the investigation initiated into the crime, the speeches for the defense or the accusation, the verdict returned, the sentencing, the fourth power, Roger Garrison the investigator, Roger Garrison’s discovery, Roger Garrison’s mistake, Scott and Elisabeth, the missing proof and the strange fruit of fear. From these structures arises such entity as a scientific, almost “surgical” approach of the detective story. By the same token, finite verbs constitute not only states of affairs which correspond to the individual sentences but also whole systems of very diverse types of states of affairs. Among these we can distinguish, first, concrete situations such as the fight in the small hotel room, rue Cujas, reported by two French witnesses Gérard Roussel and Suzanne Bovy. Then we grasp complex processes involving objects, with the use of a bottle containing cantharide powder mistaken for a bottle of sherry. This is followed successively by agreements and conflicts. While the sequence where Mrs. Hancock and Scott Hamilton are sympathizing on board the “Liberty” introduces a certain degree of stability, Mrs. Hancock’s suspicions concerning Scott Hamilton’s treacherous letter to her editor represent a revelation that leads Chester Himes to uncover the inherent social dispositions of his characters. We are therefore tempted to agree with Roland Barthes when he argues that a literary work is essentially paradoxical because it forms a solid, irreducible nucleus in the unresolved tangle of events, conditions, and collective mentality (Barthes 1967, 74). Finally, a whole world of related events is created with variously determined elements since the third-person narrative is told by an omniscient narrator or by witnesses through their reported testimonies. But, considering that the various sequences stand out as hermetic, impersonal units of scientifically observed facts, the whole stock of sequences that are juxtaposed and not narrowly interconnected constitutes the portrayed world of the work, that is to say a scientifically observed world, carved out in the raw with surgical precision, then laid out bare.

If the progression/digression dichotomy is to be considered, it is clear that the key device employed by Chester Himes in the production of suspense is the logico-temporal gap between the crime and its solution due to the digressive elements, including blocking figures such as Roger Garrison the investigator, Gérard Roussel and Suzanne Bovy the confused witnesses, or the false black criminals that impede progress toward a solution. Our principal interest will be with the pattern form of A Case of Rape as a detective story and Chester Himes’s use of dialectical irony in the disclosing of his ideological choices. If we consider as a decisive point that the puzzle element is vital to the detective story, we must first focus on Chester Himes’s process of posing a mystery to be solved, then on his art of giving insight into the reality that his detective story simulates.

The work of Chester Himes is of three different kinds. Not only has he retained the puzzle element (as have Patricia Highsmith, John Bingham, Nicolas Freeling and Shelley Smith), but he also uses the crime story to investigate human personality while being concerned with expressing an attitude toward society (like Margot Bennett, Ross Macdonald, Friedrich Dürenmatt and PeterWalhoo). But beyond these divisions, Chester Himes has deliberately chosen to use the crime story as a way of expressing his characters’ insights.
Beautifully composed, *A Case of Rape* might serve as a model of how little rather than how much violence is needed as an ingredient in a successful crime story. Scott Hamilton, its central character, the victim's former friend and lover, is both hunter and hunted. The question that holds our attention from the first chapter is what will happen to this innocent man. Chester Himes presents us with a plausible criminal situation that is built up to a climax of excitement (the orgiastic use of aphrodisiac cantharide powder ending up in the supposed collective rape of a white woman in her hotel room by black men she had befriend). Chester Himes presents us with a sexual tangle which looks straightforward. And then, in the last few pages, the narrator shakes the kaleidoscope in order to show us an entirely different pattern from the one we had been so busily interpreting.

As with *A Case of Rape* Chester Himes has created a book in which he attempts to explore the springs of crime, we might say that what absorbs him is to show the violence that lives behind the bland faces people present to the world. His point is clearly that anything that dehumanizes people is primitive and that the racial attitudes of society are symptoms of a dehumanized culture. It is in the area of sexual relationships that the theme of this detective story makes its greatest impact. Elizabeth Hancock and Scott Hamilton perceive one another as projections of their own desires and terrors. Besides, the two of them are both muddled and distressed about their own identities. One of the striking features of Chester Himes's detective story is the way he combines the portrayal of character with the story of the investigation.

In fact, Chester Himes's manner does not merely consist in working back from effect to cause, from trial and sentencing to crime, that is to say from the judicial decision to the original social disruption, but in arousing in the reader the desire to unravel the threads of an enigma, to move beyond the prototypical figure of the black rapist and the sexually aroused white woman so as to derive from the passages of dialectical and rhetorical irony a need to know more. We can refer, for instance, to the passages about the alleged worldwide repercussions in the international Press of the case of the collective rape of a white woman by four black men. Himes's ambiguous statement about the interest of the international Press is made with the implication that readers are free to interpret its meaning in a sense opposite to the one "conventionally" stated in the text.

As a structure, the text of *A Case of Rape* requires that its perspectives be continually related to one another. But although the perspectives follow on in a strict sequence, the narration is fragmented. Segments of character perspectives are set up against each other leaving readers to imagine the link up for themselves and to establish connections, not just between segments of different perspectives, but also between segments of the same perspective. Some of these segments appear to be utterly unrelated and may even come into conflict with one another. The very fact that perspectives on the crime story are given to the reader's wandering viewpoint in segments is an indication that a process of combination is required and that the necessary coherence of the text is to be implemented by the reader's act of ideation.

A question arises. How is the reader to describe the connection between the various sequences as the construction of the story moves backwards? It must be recalled that *A Case of Rape* contains the important subplot of the interrupted love affair of Elizabeth Hancock and Scott Hamilton. Besides, although devised as an independent unit, each sequence can achieve its end only by aiming at something beyond itself. The fulfillment, however, takes place not in the text but in the readers' minds as they are the ones who
must activate the interplay of the sequences pre-structured by their juxtaposition. Now, it is through their juxtaposition and the backward pattern it creates that these sequences set in motion a process that will lead to the formation of an ideological viewpoint.

What is more, distance is at the heart of Chester Himes’s aesthetic construction of *A Case of Rape* and of his ideological perception. But we had better refer to *distance*, a two-dimensional mode of perception, an ontological standing apart from conventional categories. Chester Himes reaches out to the reader by raising a sheaf of intellectual issues meant to disturb and puzzle, such as: How does one account for human motives of action? How does one know the self? The other? By drawing such questions out of the vernacular experiences of both white and black characters, Chester Himes manages to show the universality of blackness. We could even suggest that the detective story serves as a lure to all readers in order to introduce a lesson focused on the disjunction about the way things are and the way they should be.

In *A Case of Rape* the pattern form of the detective story is laid down flat. Due to the story’s two-dimensional mode of perception, everything in this mystery is at once infinitely close and infinitely remote. The closeness conveyed by the abundance and the precision of the details concerning the characters’ physical appearances as well as material and cultural backgrounds lends unity and presence to the text, whereas, on the other hand, the remoteness derived from a panoramic overview provided by the formal succession of sequences emphasizes the objective features of the experience and the impersonality of the narration in the step-by-step process of the inquiry which is devised to close the logico-temporal gap that separates the present of the discovery of Elizabeth Hancock’s death from the past that prepared it. With the purpose of understanding the why of Mrs. Hancock’s death, of unraveling the hidden story of the rape, Chester Himes reveals the effects of the crime before reaching a statement of its causes. Distance and defamiliarization are combined in a deliberately sketchy narration turned into a faulty explanation. And, indeed, Chester Himes is bent on explaining facts far more than on describing the reality which is seen behind a mask.

The impersonality of the tone is by no means non-participation. This very short detective story is close to an archetypal fable describing the social reality of racism and racial stereotypes. The text is structured by explanations about each character’s past life in such a way that it allows for and, indeed, frequently runs counter to the disposition of the readers who are waiting for fundamental moves. The blanks in the explanations break up the continuity of the different stages of the narration. And thus, in this short story constructed of progressive and digressive elements the blanks marshal selected perspective segments into a fragmented, counter-factual, contrastive or telescoped sequence, nullifying any expectation of good continuation. As a result, the imagination is automatically mobilized, thus increasing the activity of the reader who cannot help but try and supply the missing links that might bring the mystery to a dénouement. The blanks impeding or slowing down the progression of the enquiry generate images built up by the reader—such as Elizabeth Hancock basking in Scott Hamilton’s love while they were living at the Trayas, a little village in the south of France, then Elizabeth and Scott shut up in a quiet flat near Hampstead Heath in London, keeping away from people, or again Elizabeth and Scott overcome by the crowd in Majorca, eventually running short of money and, finally, the misunderstanding between the two lovers when Scott decides to resort to his wife for financial help, unaware of the fact that Elizabeth was in no way looking for financial security. Her love affair with Scott meant for her the sweetness of a
moral shelter she had been longing for, forgetfulness and peace, the shutting out of despair.

The various blanks in the progression of the intra-story investigation generate a number of different images –images that cannot be synthesized into a sequence but have to be continually abandoned the moment the reader is forced by the staccato rhythm of the story to produce a new one. The reader reacts to an image by building another more comprehensive image. When evoking Elizabeth Hancock, we can say that images follow one another. Thus, the image of the neurotic, temperamental woman gives way to that of the underdog, the vulnerable being hurt by men's pride, defeated by life. In this process lies the frill relevance of the use of blanks in *A Case of Rape*. By suspending conventional narrative continuity, blanks play a vital role in image-building, a role whose intensity derives from the fact that images are formed only to vanish. In this sense, we might say that in *A Case of Rape* the gaps in the flood of explanations provided by the omniscient narrator give rise to images of the first and second degree. Second degree images are those in which we react to the images we have formed. The process may become clearer if we illustrate it with examples. The first image of Elizabeth Hancock that arises in the reader's mind in the first chapter—or at the first stage of the detective story—is that of an ambiguous character, a fragile woman no doubt, but maybe a woman of loose morals, considering she has gone up to a small hotel room with four men. Then another image emerges as the investigation moves ahead: it is that of a sex-hungry woman—next superseded by the image of a smart intellectual New Englander. Two other images later arise in succession: that of a neurotic American woman, followed by that of a shy lover eager to find shelter for her sweet romantic love. Instability reigns as the latter image soon gives way to that of the sex-hungry woman, before the reader is led back to the image of the vulnerable woman, society's victim. By suspending narrative continuity, the gaps create clashing images. By so doing, they help to hinder but also to stimulate the process of image building.

It then becomes clear that Chester Himes transcends the murder mystery genre. Ideology molds the text into a sociological analysis of a world both unsound and unsure. How does the ideological viewpoint fit in? It is clear that the chief elements of this structuring activity are the (reader-built) links—or contradictions—between the observer's point of view and those of the people on whom he reports. In this third-person narrative where Chester Himes assumes authorial omniscience, his commands of the characters' thoughts and actions allow him to create material suitable to the manner in which he wants to denounce all forms of prejudice. It may be black people's prejudices when dark-skinned Ted Elkins holds out the lethal drink to Elizabeth Hancock because he resents the attention she pays to light-skinned Scott Hamilton. It may also be white people's prejudices when, after Elizabeth Hancock's rape and violent death, the four black men she had befriended become, at once, the most convenient suspects. What is to be emphasized is that Chester Himes's contrast of perspectives, his use of his characters' backgrounds and past lives in order to illustrate their personalities, gives a wider scope to his ideological stand.

Chester Himes's art as a detective story-teller obviously consists in promoting suspense out of a variety of narrative devices foreshadowing and postponing the denouement. But there is more to *A Case of Rape* than suspense. What sets this crime story apart is its ideological stand reminiscent of Himes's autobiographical novel *The Third Generation*, a
Reading a detective story is primarily an activity of decipherment and discovery. What are, then, Chester Himes’s crime story’s secrets? In *A Case of Rape*, a detective story in black and white, the blame is not to be laid either on blacks or on whites but on all men with this still unanswered question: If one of us is victimized by society, don’t we all share the blame?

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**ABSTRACTS**

In *A Case of Rape*, Chester Himes uses the crime story pattern to investigate human personality. Employing the logico-temporal gap as a key device in the production of suspense, Himes explores the springs of crime. But there is more to the novel than suspense: also shown is the violence that simmers behind the bland faces of people present to the world. The aim of this paper is to examine the African-American novelist’s two dimensional mode of perception, an ontological way to stand apart from conventional categories in a detective story that takes color from its social environment while imparting it a further layer of meaning.

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II. Space in the detective novel
The South as Literary Space in African-American Hard-Boiled Detective Fiction: Challenging Images that Persist and Matter in U.S. Culture

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Place or setting has always mattered in hard-boiled detective fiction. In *A Rage in Harlem* (1957), Chester Himes’s first Harlem hard-boiled novel, the Southern United States is identified from the beginning as an influential element in the characters’ backgrounds. Jackson, the central male character, “had attended a Negro college in the South” (8), and with his twin brother, Goldy, had been nicknamed The Gold Dust Twins by “white people in the South” (29). The central female character, Imabelle, “had come from the South,” along with her cohorts in the money-making scam around which the plot revolves (17). When Jackson seeks information he joins an improbably named set of men for breakfast. They talk over a huge meal of “baked ham, lye hominy, stewed okra and corn, Southern biscuits, and... sweet-potato pie” (35). Although only the biscuits are explicitly named as such, the characters come together in a cultural ritual sharing specific foods, prepared and served in specific Southern ways. As they discuss ways to address a problem related to an “old hick-town pitch” that they all know, they all rely on a shared sociocultural rural South past from which an answer will be derived. The South is not the contemporary setting for the novel, and yet it obviously has been a pivotal place for the characters’ identity formation. It is the place that at various intervals the characters refer to as “back home” (35). Knowing that Himes understood the importance of place for the genre, the questions that this discussion addresses are how and why he chose to make an explicit connection between the South and Harlem in creating his characters. The South has meant a place where to migrate from with two mass movements in the 20th century. The first, the Great Migration meant moving to the North-East; the second, around World War II added the West as a destination. For the sake of comparison, this essay will
consider Chester Himes’s and Walter Mosley’s fictions that were produced decades apart under vastly different circumstances.

2 The most obvious and important answer to how Himes constructed the connection lies in the detailed presentations of and rituals associated with food and shared meals. In the same ways that foods literally support the survival of human beings, food ways are emphasized in support of Himes’s characters’ development. Despite years spent in Pine Bluff, Arkansas, and his having a number of relatives on his mother’s side that were Southerners from various states, Himes was a Midwesterner by birth and acculturation, having spent most of his childhood in Ohio and an early portion of his adult life in the Northern United States. So, in much the same ways as Himes’s fictional Harlem is based on a short time actually spent in New York City, the South he depicts is not fostered directly by an intimate personal history there. And yet, the cuisine that his Harlemites prefer in their homes and restaurants is typical Southern “soul” food. In the only eating scene in A Rage in Harlem, the reader finds Jackson eating a “pot of pig’s ears, collard greens and okra” (41). That menu reflects the food of poor Southern blacks, inherited from their centuries-long slave diets –yet now made tasty and desirable. In The Heat’s On (1966), a character eats “fried hominy, covered... with fried [fat] meat, and doused... with molasses” (94). His companion, the woman who has prepared the breakfast meal, comments on the evident relish her friend shows, “You can get the boy out of the country, but you can’t get the country out of the boy” (94). The country, or rural South, is the region from which many of Himes’s most resourceful characters originally come.

3 Walter Mosley is in some ways the heir-apparent to that literary space paved in part by Chester Himes. Each author, like all in the hard-boiled genre, has created fictional adopted “homelands” for their characters. And yet, very much like Himes, Mosley also evokes past connections among the characters that are reflected in their shared eating ways. When Easy Rawlins is out seeking information in Devil in a Blue Dress, he visits “Pete” Dupree. Easy is accompanied by his friend, Raymond “Mouse” Alexander. The characters’ prior connections are made evident first by their shared food literacy. Their shared socio-cultural past will lubricate the way for a more amenable meeting during which Easy will extract the vital information he needs. How to begin the discussion is awkward for Easy. Dupree is distracted by grief because Coretta, his girlfriend, has been found murdered the night before. Easy is uncomfortable because he has just had a clandestine sexual encounter with Coretta, and is the last to have seen her alive. He is withholding both facts from Dupree, and feels sad, ashamed and nervous. Mouse saves the day by quickly determining how to bring the two men together:

    “Pete!” Mouse was bright. “That pigtails I smell?”
    “Yeah, Bula made some this mo’nin’. Black-eyes too.”
    “You don’t need to show me, I just run after my nose.”

    Mouse went around Dupree toward the smell. We [Easy and Dupree] stood in the tiny entrance looking at each other’s shoulders. I was still half outside. Two crickets sounded from the rose beds that Bula kept. (216)

4 The two men might have remained in that limbo space at the edge of the house’s threshold if Mouse had not astutely broken the barrier of discomfort and estrangement. Mouse uses the meal and the ritual of eating as the icebreaker: “‘You boys better com’ on in,’ Mouse said from the end of the hall. ‘Food’s on the table’” (217).

5 Himes uses food and eating scenes in the same way. He makes obvious the import of food and eating as powerful metaphors when he connects religious practices and one
character’s indictment of the failure of Christianity as a viable conduit to justice for poor black people: “I doan have to tell you the flesh of Jesus is indigestible... ‘cause they [poor blacks] ain’t even digested the flesh of the white Jesus in these two thousand years, an’they been eating him every Sunday” (Blind Man with a Pistol 117). He suggests that there is a price to be paid when what one eats is not nourishing. So, simply the act of eating is not alone what is to be sought. One must eat wisely, if it is to be a life-sustaining act. The presentation of Southern connections that buttress the identities of Himes’s characters is grotesque: Himes calls attention to a phenomenon that Wolfgang Kayser describes in his study of the grotesque in literature as “the distortion of all ingredients, the fusion of different realms, the coexistence of beautiful, bizarre, ghastly, and repulsive elements, the merger of parts into a turbulent whole” (79).

6 As the Harlem series progressed and Himes understood the power of the genre, he made even more deliberate choices about past cultural connections in characterizations of his Harlemites. Readers, accordingly, found more and more scenes that showed eating and very detailed menus: cornbread, blackeyed peas and rice (aka hoppin’ john), huge watermelon slices, biscuits and red-eye gravy, and gallons of ice-cold lemonade – especially for the detectives when they are tired and find the cases they are investigating particularly baffling. There is a historical resonance in the inclusion of that kind of food; these are characters that have had a harsh past, but one from which they found ways to survive and nourish themselves. Typical of Himes’s resourceful female characters, Sister Heavenly is described thus in The Heat’s On: “At fifteen she had run away from the sharecropper’s shack her family had called home... because she was too cute and too lazy to hoe the corn and chop the cotton...[but after traveling to Harlem,] she had gotten into the faith healing pitch... she had been the ruler of the roost” (96). Characters like Sister Heavenly are successfully transplanted Southerners who eat and live in abundance. But the road to material comfort is not always smooth, even in Harlem. Card playing scams, like the one named “Georgia skin” (Blind Man with a Pistol 121) abound. Even Sister Heavenly is double-crossed by her criminal subordinates. When she loses everything she owns in a fire, she thinks, “Well, I’m back on my bare ass where I started, but I ain’t yet flat on my back” (96). And of course that survival ethos is the raison d’être for the Blues music form. In their new incarnations, even as Northerners by birth, Himes’s characters harken back to that musical past when needed. In doing so, one sees at least in part how these transplanted Southerners create a place for themselves within the new community.

7 The formulaic use of closed settings allows one to examine closely the effects of societal containment on the key characters. The reader’s attention is explicitly directed to the details of place to identify almost immediately that an intimate home turf is being violated when the crime occurs, which suggests dis-ease within the text’s fictional community. That spatial mapping serves to establish two primary factors: who is imagined to belong in that communal space and who is imagined to not belong there. The author must establish an understanding of the values and rules of acceptable behavior for those characters that “belong”, because acceptance of those propositions will determine the reader’s later acceptance of who the culprit is and how that character has brought crime into the fold. The criminal will inevitably be an outsider in the disguise of an insider, or an insider who has been corrupted by the influence of outsiders. Outsider status is linked in large part to moral and ethical values that are posed as dishonest and, therefore, are unlike those idealized values and standards of conduct shared by characters that are configured as community insiders. A key to this construction is that
the more heterogeneity there is, the greater the imperative will be for readers to be able to claim their own turf in the text’s social ordering. In other words, place identification constructs social bearings—a power struggle within the society of the text and its readers’ own. What is being established is who will be figured as a normative citizen in a contested and evolving society, and thereby who will be able to lay claim to the fullest share of society’s fruits.

Historically, based on a convoluted mix of ancestral arrival over the colonial or early national periods, white Anglo-Saxon Protestant males have claimed the four identity traits they possess as the most important for full citizenship: race, ethnicity, religion and gender. In other words, by highlighting and valorizing certain individual characteristics those in power made it clear that they were the group to be most like, to model and assimilate. But human beings are a more complicated conglomeration of identities than just their race, ethnicity, religious affiliation and gender. Are white lower class women superior to black men who manage to achieve upper class economic status? In the battle over voting rights in the late 19th century the answer was no, according to the de jure implications of the 14th amendment’s emphasis on males only. What of mixed-race people? Is physical appearance (looking “white”) to supersede genetic ancestry (having African “blood”)? If so, what of the Irish and other late 19th and early 20th century immigrants who looked white, but were not socially accepted as such until late into the 20th century? Obviously, those in the U. S. who wished to remain the societal standard-bearers decided they had to uphold ideologies that argued for differences invisible to the naked eye by being tied to visible signs of socio-economic differences, which were later construed as important determinant traits useful for further refining and differentiating what Richard Dyer refers to as “social groupings.”

Accordingly, the detective’s primary job in African-American fiction has been not just to explain how the crime occurred but to help uncover that which is hidden in order to make obvious why the offending culprit never really belonged in the group or became diseased by association.

When one begins reading Himes’s detective stories, one notices almost immediately the characters’ (male and female) connection with values and norms inherited from their ties with the South. Even non-southern-born characters have a connection via their ancestry. Or there are connections established through the vernacular spoken between the hero and other characters. Himes purposefully employs dialect as well as phonetic spellings like “shet up” (A Rage in Harlem 39) to suggest pronunciations that are stereotypically associated with Southern ways of speaking. One may surmise that there is an on-going historically and socially valorized cultural connection at work to place African-American characters of Southern ancestry as insiders in the mainstream U. S. cultures of the novels. That premise is true, and yet that relationship to place and the characters’ centralized inclusion in the text does not occur as only a marker for valorization. Instead, one finds a more complex counter discursive role for Southern ancestry and cultural influences.

African-American characters, the figurative others usually encountered in mainstream detective fiction to establish, by comparison, desired normative traits and behaviors are repositioned in Himes’s fictional Harlem. His creations are outrageous and absurdist in their schemes, scams and costuming. They also robustly reject easy categorization based on pre-determined racialized expectations. In part that resistance is predicated on rejecting denigration of their rural, poor Southern pasts and cultural influences. The South has been a place of danger and denigration, but it also has been where the
characters honed their survival skills. So, it is not mainstream acceptance per se that one may see in the characters’ agency. The characters are being judged as valorized by social forces that exist within their community. For Himes’s black characters, that community simply is the mainstream for their logic and worldviews. In keeping with the traditional formula of the detective fiction genre, the Harlem community, their value systems and even their sense of aesthetics are the authenticating barometers for measurement of norms and comfort: theirs is the place into which others must fit or be ousted.

12 If, in the third novel of the series, *The Crazy Kill* (1959), Johnny Perry, the central male character, is an underworld kingpin involved in a number of lucrative criminal enterprises, he is also a revered community figure known for his integrity. Describing Perry to the police officers who are interrogating her, Mamie Pullen says: “No, sir, I’m dead certain it wasn’t him... Johnny was always a good boy... always as honest as the day is long”. And yet she also is straightforward about the violent capabilities she knows Perry has exhibited since his youth: “he did a stretch in a chain gang... He killed a man for beating his mother — his stepfather.... On the chain gang... he and another con got to fighting with pickaxes over a card game. Johnny was always hot-headed...” (38-39).

13 Knowing the circumstances under which he became who he is in Georgia, knowing him as both loving, loyal, honest and dangerous, mercurial and tough, Mamie Pullen and her husband, Big Joe, had “thought of [Johnny] as a son” and brought him North with them when they migrated to Harlem. Big Joe apprenticed his protégé into the gambling business: he had learned in the South that one of the ways a big, unskilled, physically scarred, ex-convict young black who was smart and ambitious could create a successful business life was by addressing markets within his own community. Although this kind of social philosophy is not exclusively Southern, or even American, Big Joe gained entrepreneurial knowledge through his experiences in the South then “staked” (39) Johnny’s first businesses. Big Joe gave the specific seeds for home-grown business acumen to Johnny, who planted them in Harlem.

14 In the later published prequel to *Devil in a Blue Dress*, Walter Mosley set all of the key scenes of *Gone Fishin’* in rural Louisiana where every aspect of the characters’ lives was formed by the local social pattern. Rich whites and poor blacks are framed by the dialect and vernacular culture of the setting. Life experience, folk wisdom, conjuring skills, and the ability to find avenues from which one may exert agency are the rungs that create hierarchy among the characters. Even though Easy at first resists the authority of Momma Jo, the powerful shaman woman Mouse leaves him with, he eventually gives in to her influence. In describing his and other characters’ responses to Momma Jo, Easy also suggests the power that she has accrued within the community:

> They did what she said like they were children. But I didn’t question it either, because that is how life was back then. You listened to older folks and did what you were told. Even if you knew better you’d follow the rules because that’s how we were raised (50).

15 Respect is garnered in some combination of two ways among these country people in both Himes’s and Mosley’s fictions. There is Momma Jo’s way, with an aura of spirituality, mysticism, and earthy feminine strength. And there is Mouse’s way that Easy describes as an ethic of violence:

> Mouse never took an order unless that’s what he wanted to do. Mouse wasn’t the only man I knew who’d stand up for what he believed, but he was different in one way: most men who stood up for themselves would rather die than be slaves; Mouse would’ve rather killed (51).
That inculcated complex cultural sensibility comes with Easy to Los Angeles and informs his way of life and value system. Finding what of that ethic he wants to retain and that which he wants to jettison informs his moral struggle.

The perspectives of Himes’s Harlemites and of Mosley’s transplanted Angelenos may not be that of most of the readers. Poor black Southerners are frequently stereotyped, considered to be easy fodder for jokes and condescension. While the music, dance, food, fashion, and even language styles (minus the regional accents) of Southern blacks may have been accepted, imitated or modified for consumption by people from other walks of life and ethnicity, the citizens themselves have not been elevated in esteem or cultural status. Too many people feel free not only to disparage but to laugh at and dismiss poor black Southerners as hopelessly ill-fitting for the times — undereducated, socially unassimilated, and of little, if any, political importance. They are not perceived as valued 21st century Americans.

That on-going denigration goes back a long way. Demeaning human beings based on social and economic categorization was argued against in Phyllis Wheatley’s poetry, by Linda Brent and Frederick Douglass; and W. E. B. DuBois was addressing a similar situation when stating that the problem of the 20th century would be the color line. The costs of racial categorization is in part the glue that binds the works of writers as different as Zora Neale Hurston, James Baldwin, Gwendolyn Brooks, Chester Hirnes, and Toni Morrison to each other; as well as to detective fiction writers as diverse as Walter Mosley, Barbara Neely and Paula Woods. Often unnamed but equally powerful, socio-economic class issues have been integral parts of the defining equation in the symbiotic relationship between mainstream American and African-American literary traditions. What an overview of the arc of detective fiction that extends from Himes to Mosley suggests is a kind of richness of ambiguity in addressing the specific categorization related to the nexus of race, class and regional origin. While the South figures in African-American history and imagination as a corrupting place of quick death, fear, crippling discrimination, and disappointment, it is also a place that fosters agency, creativity, vibrant self-reflective cultural forms, including vernacular language and incisive humor. Looking at the ways both novelists have constructed their detective characters will show that ambiguity. In particular, one notes the changes that have occurred in the interval between Himes and Mosley, and the way things have stayed the same, especially with regard to the influence of the South on their respective characterizations of the heroic.

This essay offers a speculative view intended to spark more discussion and research. Both authors are recuperating and valorizing a significant segment of the American population that has yet to be fully accepted in American society: poor, black, rural and urban Southern African Americans. Himes’s and Mosley’s detective fictions argue implicitly that being poor, black, rural or urban traditional African American characters cannot a priori be a legitimate basis for posing them as agents for societal dis-ease.

Over the last twenty years, detective fiction has been increasingly seen as a medium in which to examine the fears, anxieties, values and beliefs of the mainstream culture that produces it. In other words, by looking at the construction of the detective hero and heroic actions, the femme fatale and virtuous female characters, characters that are racialized and/or sexualized, the community setting or home space in which they reside, and the ways they are assigned socioeconomic class status, one begins to understand something of the issues that are informing the worlds of the novels’ authors and readers.
In the mid-1800s, for instance, when Edgar Allan Poe wrote “The Murders on Rue Morgue,” he designed what would become essentially a blueprint for the first 75 years of the genre. At that moment in history, Poe’s mainstream, middle-class readers evidently were concerned with the residual effects of the ongoing Industrial Revolution, which was causing international and intranational mass movements of laboring class people away from the land. The 19th century also was a time when many of the sciences, including forensics, anthropology, blood-related medical health specialties, were professionalized. And it was a period of deepening colonial incursion.

Predictably, then, in the rue Morgue story, Poe features an upper-middle-class white detective that is able to use newly developed scientific knowledge to decipher the clues that lead to the capture of the orangutan that has been invading the space of working class neighborhoods and murdering the women living there. There is also a strong suggested eroticism to the violent animal’s handling of its victims’ bodies. In the drawings that illustrate the story, as well as in the written descriptions, the character bringing dis-ease to the community is man-like in his appearance. The most obvious connections would be to a ruffian or a man of color, i.e. a migrating rural peasant-turned-working-class-urban-dweller, or an immigrant from the colonies.

Dupin resides in Paris, where the middle classes organized a police force to maintain law and order. African-American detective fiction changes the settings to African-American communities in urban or rural America. Most of the socioeconomic and political assumptions change, too. And yet, African-American authors use the expectations of the genre’s form (the questing hero/detectives and the closed community settings) as literary devices for adding to their commentary about the contextual lives of their black characters. That rhetorical strategy is important because it allows African-American writers to counter degrading racial stereotypes that have persisted in mainstream literature, in general, in detective fiction, in particular and in the imaginations of many of the readers.

The question that implicitly guides the narratives’ characterizations then is: “How can a member of the black community shift perceptions to allow for a full reckoning of the African American contribution to the nation’s identity, so black people are fully accepted and respected as citizens?” In partial answer to that question, many writers of hard-boiled fiction changed (and are changing) the valuation of poor, black Southern characters as a group, so that the heroic characters’ cultural specificity can be acknowledged as a value system, a marker to claim and identify with, that is equally important for the characters’ own moral and ethical evolution. Indeed, this regional acculturation becomes in part a key measure of the characters’ full worth.

Although 20 years separate Mosley’s work from Himes’s last Harlem detective novel, there is in both writers’ works a particular relationship between their characters and their Southern roots. The characters that are ultimately “heroic” base their ethical stances (as convoluted as those stances may sometimes be) towards crime, justice, civil rights and to some degree their conception of manhood, upon experiences from their own or their inherited Southern backgrounds. This connection is as important to understand now as it was at the turn of the 20th century, when Pauline Hopkins’s serialized Hagar’s Daughter was first published in The Colored American Magazine. It was true then, and remains true today, that in the hierarchy of social ordering the visibility of one’s race is a significant category because to a large extent the nation remains a segregated society. Within racialized communities specific cultural practices continue to
evolve, even as those practices are also expressions of syncretic interaction with the larger mainstream society. One's cultural literacy is learned from within the community that shapes the individual. Because of her Southern acculturation the detective heroine in Hopkins’s novel is able to manipulate local expectations and help to solve the mystery. In a similar vein, in the two Himes and Mosley series, the heroic characters are attuned to the blues ethos at play in their respective communities. So much so that Grave Digger and Coffin Ed make it clear that they have a two-tiered personal system for evaluating the crimes they will pursue. There are crimes they will not investigate because they are guided by a kind of moral imperative that is based upon “insider” knowledge of the socioeconomic and historical reality of the community they are in charge of policing.

Grave Digger and Coffin Ed know that many of the Harlem people have already had to “escape” oppressively poor and restrictive backgrounds in the Jim Crow South. There, abusive legal practices and traditions directly provoked the creation of alternative black systems of conduct -if people were to achieve any semblance of opportunity for socioeconomic advancement. But those alternative rules of conduct were not devised in willy-nilly fashions. As a reaction to state-sanctioned unjustly truncated paths to opportunity, choosing criminal conduct for economic gain follows –considering the characters’ environments. The black detectives do not condone criminal activity per se or without reservation. They simply understand why crime is prevalent. Accordingly, they appear to create a hierarchical system for the crimes they investigate. In fact what they do is to follow the lead of the Harlem citizens themselves by relegating crimes of property, petty theft, and sexual exchange to a status that might be termed entrepreneur activities. Those activities are not the purview of any particular nation or region. In fact, Himes’s and Mosley’s characters suggest traditions born from the plantocracy system (from crafty Br’er Rabbit stories to baad men figures such as Stagolee), blues figures and even the underground economy characters valorized in the blaxploitation novels and films of the 1970s and 1980s.

On the other hand, Himes’s detectives receive succor amid the social chaos of their domestic and professional spaces, and that comfort also involves reflective notions of traditional racially segregated Southern black life –the food, music, language, religious practices, folk ways, close-knit community networks, and value systems for personal conduct. Therefore, the hero-characters’ very concepts of the American Dream, achieving socioeconomic success in America, are conceived as intricately entwined with perceptions gained from their Southern pasts. And yet, Mosley and Himes present the South in ways that differ greatly.

Himes does not offer resolutions to the situations he involves his characters in. He does not “distract our attention from the absurd,” as does Mosley, who “describe[s] with compassion his protagonists’ and their race toward destruction [with] an emotional perspective... that weaken[s] the effect of the grotesque” (Kayser 186). The various characters’ personal histories (escape from the law, or dirt-poor sharecropping life, or a partner they have tricked or been unfaithful to) are often cited as reasons for being in Harlem. In the music played and danced to in clubs, bars, and restaurants, where schemes are hatched by criminals and clues found by the detectives, the reader will find lyrics to Delta blues as well as the Chicago or St. Louis jazz styles. In the references to religion and religious music, especially lyrics characters intone from spirituals and slave ditties, particularly about “patterrollers” (A Rage in Harlem 73), the Southern past and influences always are there.
That past is also present in the suggestions of historical references that buttress the narratives. When Jackson says the old folk songs are “like a ghost haunting him” (Ibid. 75), that haunting is from a past in the South. And just in case the reader misses that point, the omniscient narrator provides a seeming aside of historical information, or the reader’s knowledge is called upon to infer that information. But what does that mixing of past and present offer? Some bitterness and some happiness are found, but no answer to the bigger questions of how to escape the categories of race and class is proffered. However, in much the same way as authors of mainstream American literature will infer contextual information based upon the assumption their readers share their worldviews, Himes assumes his readers will bring certain knowledge to the reading of his texts that is shared with his experience of black life rooted in the South, even if the readers are not themselves African American. So, he turns his detective fiction into blues novels. And he does so without explaining his frame of mind. Those readers who are not informed are left to discern meaning strictly through the narrative’s context—to receive the world as presented by the characters’ own experiences and rules of conduct.

Himes always presents the South as a dangerous place which many of his characters have had to flee. Most readers will recognize and expect to see that view of the South. And yet, Himes gives two sides to his characters’ Southern experience, life-affirming and life-threatening. Both facets influence the characters as they are now in “Harlem”, which produces a more complex picture of these people, their pasts, and their cultural communities than if a less unequivocal regional were presented.

Mosley is more direct and to some degree more nostalgic in his presentation of his characters’ Southern pasts. He, like Himes, makes the cultural connections transparent. But the past he shows stands on a firmer ground than Himes’s. It is a place where the characters have ancestral and intimate connections with the people, the land, and the culture: they are not just from the South, but of it. They do not just participate in that cultural background, they help to form it at its most fundamental levels. In Los Angeles these same characters seem to be struggling to establish their place among other strangers questing in the same way. Predictably one finds more ethnic, racial and cultural diversity in the characters that are seen in the periphery of the main characters. Chicanos, Asians, West Indians, and others will be neighbors, local business people, witnesses questioned in search of clues. Himes’s detectives work in Harlem, but live in Astoria, a middle-class African-American neighborhood that is removed from the “action.” One senses, however, that Mosley’s Rawlins will stay in Los Angeles, in the heart of things, because it affords him a different kind of freedom than Texas or Louisiana might, with their rigid and segregated social hierarchies.

Looking at A Little Yellow Dog (1996), one can see that Mosley firmly establishes the ways the South inform the story’s cultural milieu. The novel begins, “‘Hi, Easy,’ EttaMae Harris greeted me in our common Texan drawl” (18). That drawl is their home language, the language of comfort, familiarity, a locating tool for identifying commonality. And, of course, there is the beauty and warmth of the melodious sound of “Hi, Easy.” Whenever Easy is with characters from his past, they speak with each other in dialect, even in Los Angeles. They readily embrace their Southern roots that help them establish their identities in a proud, self-accepting way. Their social status has improved because of their westward migration, but they do not feel they must reconstruct a totally new self in order to succeed in their new home.
The first clue to the crime that will unfold in the novel is found at the Sojourner Truth Junior High School. The reference to the great emancipator is too obvious to delve into, and yet her name alone marks historical layers of referencing to an infamous Southern past. Then, the reader meets Easy’s most significant friend, Mouse, whom he calls “an old time gangster”. Mouse is in the tradition of the legendary baad black men of the South: men around whose lives songs were sung, and against whose actions the bravery of those resisting slavery and oppression were measured. Mouse is described as “A tough who could work with you or go it alone. He wasn’t afraid of prison or death, and that made him the kind of man that people left alone... Even the police” (28-29). Easy, a morally upright character, the socially conscious knight-errant of the series, is coupled with the much more pragmatic and street-wise Mouse in order to create a detective team. Mosley follows the hard-boiled tradition to an extent, and this teaming allows him to make Easy a more self-reflecting protagonist. In choosing to maintain his close ties with Mouse, who on the one hand is unremorseful in his use of violence and thoroughly interested in the “bling bling,” while on the other hand the most reliable and trustworthy friend Easy has, Mosley poses an important ethical dilemma for the detective hero: the price to pay for friendship.

In large part the ethical and moral value systems that support Easy’s decisions about his conduct in answer to that question come from a stance he has formed in the “fire” of Southern life. One stands up for one’s friends, even when they are the kind that shoot first and ask questions later—because there are always extenuating circumstances for blacks in the South of the 1940s, 1950s, 1960s. After a crime of passion (one of several, along with the crimes of opportunity and the crimes of criminal necessity), Mouse explains to his friend: “I didn’t mean to hit him. You know that woman didn’t mean a thing t’me. When William hit the ground I knew I was wrong. I was gonna say I was sorry. I was gonna buy him a drink—but he went for his gun, Easy. I swear he did.” Then tears well up in Mouse’s eyes because he really feels sad—which in turn, “brought tears uncontrollably to [Easy’s] own eyes” (31). These are characters Mosley creates in order to give complexity to black people who in traditional mainstream detective fiction would be silent servants to white characters. Black people that give their lives wholly and cheerfully, gracefully or sullenly to white folks and their needs—but never to their own black families, friends, neighbors, or selves. Black people who are the buffoons and “zip coon” figures that have provided comic relief for traditional genre texts, aping white life as it is idealized. The female racialized counterparts have been lustful Jezebels or emasculating Sapphires. But Mosley says this of his Southerners-turned-Southern Californians:

Southwest L. A. was palm trees and poverty; neat little lawns tended by the descendents of ex-slaves and massacred Indians. It was beautiful and wild; a place that was almost a nation, populated by lost peoples that were never talked about in the newspapers or seen on the TV. You might have read about freedom marchers; you might have heard about a botched liquor store robbery (if a white man was injured)—but you never heard about Tommy Jones growing the biggest roses in the world or how Fiona Roberts saved her neighbor by facing off three armed men with only the spirit of her God to guide her (32).

Mosley, like Himes in a more satirical and scathing turn, creates characters that challenge stereotypes about black folk, and they both, accordingly, begin that ideological work with the most commonly held assumptions, those concerning the least valued members of American society—poor, Southern, rural African Americans.
When things get tough (as they must in the ultra-violent world of hardboiled detective fiction) Rawlins, and others like him, turn to their pasts for both physical relief (temporary escape) and moral and ethical rules of conduct. It is, then, more than just the memories of their Southern pasts that sustain Mosley’s heroes. It is the place where the hero’s self that one finds in the narrative’s current setting has been forged. Unlike the more traditional American dream of escaping as much as possible from one’s situation through movement to build a better life in a new place, Easy seems to have moved to California looking for more opportunities to express the self he became in his Southern homeland. There is a kind of positive acceptance in that view of the Southern black migrant to post World War II Los Angeles (an American frontier of sorts) that resonates with the double-consciousness that DuBois addressed as he talked about becoming fully functioning African-American citizens. In both historical time periods, the point was to have better access to the American Dream.

The United States is in the midst of an immigration boom unheard of since the turn of the last century –and not just in the influx of new populations from Europe. People of color, in particular Hispanics and Asians, are leading the numbers. The U. S. are different. Things have changed. The effects of the modern civil rights movement are being felt. There is a significantly increased number of American blacks in the middle-class, arising from affirmative action programs. Condoleezza Rice, descended from a traditional Southern African-American background, and currently the nation’s Secretary of State, after serving as the highest ranking foreign policy expert, is emblematic of that societal change. Regarding the changing faces of the last 50 years of immigration, remember Colin Powell, a second-generation American citizen, the son of working-class Jamaican immigrants, who was the face the world turned to for years, representing U. S. diplomacy. Both Ms. Rice and General Powell have served under a president elected from the Republican party, the self-avowed political group that represents U. S. business interests. Yet, things have not changed all the way with regard to the categorization of black people. There is more racial openness, and yet much has remained exactly the same, or grown worse in so far as certain segments of the population have been left behind.

We see what we want to see, what we have been repeatedly incited to see by all of the shared forms of public discourse: television, movies, pictures in the newspapers and popular magazines, videos, and literature. We see what makes each of us comfortable in positining ourselves as the normal citizen who belongs. And yet, there are other ways of seeing, other perspectives. Detective fiction, as it is being written by African-American authors, is allowing for some of those other ways that are perhaps not so new, but certainly only newly acknowledged as a norm in the genre. It is important to understand this change in the use of the trope of the “other-worldly” black character because it is, as Toni Morrison suggests in “Romancing the Shadow,” an essay in Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination (1992):

... autonomy, authority, newness and difference, absolute power—not only become the major themes and presumptions of American literature, but that each one is made possible by, shaped by, activated by a complex awareness and employment of a constituted Africanism. It is this Africanism, deployed as rawness and savagery that provided the staging ground and arena for the elaboration of the quintessential American identity (44).
Contemporary detective fiction, written by and about African Americans makes clear that the “quintessential American identity” is and has always been constructed to some degree in relation to its “Africanness,” but decidedly not in all of its human dimensions.

Despite a remarkable amount of social, political, economic, even racial advancement, poverty remains endemic across whole swaths of the American South. In Himes’s posthumously published Harlem novel, *Plan B* (1993), Thomsson Black’s family’s ancestral past from slavery to the poverty-stricken rural then urban areas of the post-emancipation South is prefaced in a long digressive section that leads up to the 1960s and the commencement of the contemporary story. The reader cannot know Black without knowing the stories of his fathers. The Black family was one of successive generations of dirt-poor men who were never expected to be of much social value, including Thomsson himself when he arrives in Harlem.

But Thomsson Black is poised to break that chain of ignominy. The change evolves as he asks a series of rhetorical questions throughout the novel to himself, in dialogues with other characters, and with the novel’s readers. He wonders whether black and white people, even when not under similar circumstances, are not all essentially looking to achieve the same goal: self empowerment. Black regards doing what must be done to improve one’s life, and to consolidate some degree of personal power, as primal to human beings. Even if one fails, worthiness lies in the attempt to take some action on one’s own terms. The novel suggests poor black Southern characters learn early to know that if they are to survive as anything more than a beast of burden, they “would have to rely on [themselves]... would have to assume the authority that controlled [their] life” (174). Through Thomsson Black Himes suggests the dilemma of having outlying class and racial status in late 20th century America. That idea is one that Himes alludes to in all of his works from the 1950s until the 1970s. When he created black urban transplanted characters that are from rural and urban ghettos of the South, he gave them a manifesto:

> We must achieve our equality in this society against overwhelming odds. That is why we need a springboard, why we need a beginning. We need capital. The white people had slaves, the wedding of coal and ore... the fertile earth... the underground lakes of petroleum. With all that, it didn’t require too much creative imagination for this nation to become rich and prosperous. We, however, must start at the bottom, at the chitterling of the hog (*Plan B* 166).

Thomsson Black is the character that fools everyone who underestimates him as his increasing intelligence and political savvy evolve. He fools whites, and those black characters who make unquestioned fetishes of all that represents white mainstream U. S. culture, because they see him simply as another *darky* from the country talking “corn-pone slavery-time gibberish” (191). All the while, working from a cover business called *Chitterlings, Inc.*, he organizes blacks from all walks of life to finally and violently rebel against racism. The novel is grim as it moves towards its impossibly violent denouement, and yet it does not close the imagination to other possible endings, certainly to other ways of thinking about characters like Black.

Himes did not finish the last novel in his Harlem series. The version currently available ends with an editor’s note bracketed within the last page written by Himes: “No formal conclusion exists for *Plan B*. The following pages are reconstructed from a detailed outline found with the rest of the manuscript” (192). After Himes’s death, a composite conclusion was added for the sake of narrative continuity and closure. True to the
dictates of the grotesque, however, “no true answer can be given” (Kayser 186) for the alienated world Himes presents. There is much of the absurd and the flamboyant about the reality pictured in the Harlem setting of the series. Richard Dyer notes, “Cultural representation forms set the wider terms of limitation and possibility for the (re)presentations of particularities and we have to understand how the latter are caught in the former in order to understand why such-and-such gets represented in the way it does” (2). Poor black Southerners are limited by a lack of political clout, a lack of money, and an overabundance of social constrictions that are all buttressed by the ways they are represented by and in the wider society. The dynamic nature and potential of the interactions between their strengths as well as their weaknesses as individuals, and as members of their several communities, is represented in Mosley’s Easy Rawlins series, and especially Himes’s Harlem series, as having come first from the particularities of their Southern pasts. The complexity of issues and ideas that the authors’ Southern background settings bring into sharp relief demonstrate clearly the value in creative energy and humanity these literary characters can bring to readers.

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Works Cited


NOTES

1. The detective fiction series of Barbara Neely and Paula Woods are not explored specifically in this essay. But their African-American female protagonists, Blanche White and Charlotte Justice,
respectively, would provide compelling additions to any subsequent studies of the issues highlighted here concerning the ways ancestral influences from Southern culture and experiences help shape African-American detective fiction characters. Blanche White is a working-class domestic who moves back and forth, depending upon the various crises in her life, between urban Massachusetts and her rural hometown in North Carolina. Blanche’s dependency on the folk wisdom as well as learned anxieties, especially regarding race, racism and racist traditions, are explicitly discussed between the characters in the novels as retentions from her past and her birth family’s continued life in the South. Charlotte Justice’s Southern cultural connections are less direct because she is a third generation native of Los Angeles. And yet, the retentions from her family’s cultural roots in the South can be traced by readers with the cultural literacy to discern those historical origins within the characters’ intimate conversations and references among family and friends. Both series’ characterizations and settings suggest that the two authors are calling the reader’s attention to issues related to changes wrought by diverse migration patterns that have occurred over the 20th century among African Americans.

2. A name that connotes death as well as haughtiness.

ABSTRACTS

Southern African Americans have had a profound influence on national cultural in the United States. And yet, they remain among the most disparaged of all citizens. Chester Himes chose to create the backgrounds of many of his most ambitious Harlem characters in the American South. Himes creates transplanted Southern black characters that are dynamic, creative, master manipulators of their circumstances—thereby challenging stereotypical perceptions.

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Anne-Marie Paquet-Deyris

1 Everything in Bill Duke’s 1991 film, A Rage in Harlem, seems to revolve around the notions of flamboyance and picaresque with, at its very ostentatious center, Imabelle, the eponymous heroine of Chester Himes’s novel originally published in the USA as For Love of Imabelle. Himes’s two type-cast New York cops, Coffin Ed and Grave Digger, the core of his detective fiction, are somewhat diverted from their original function. They are not looking for missing links in the detection chain as they do in The Crazy Kill for instance. Overshadowed by Jackson, a naive, religious undertaker’s assistant, and his half-brother Goldie, a Harlem crook selling tickets to heaven and impersonating a man of God, they seem to be filmed as mere token figures, extras at best, assessing facts and situations without really detecting anything. From the start then, the focus shifts from this superb team of private eyes straight from a revisited Film Noir to a motley collection of rogues’ portraits. Drifting away from the dark and cynical vision of the detective genre, Duke definitely adopts a lighter tone which impacts on the form of the storytelling. Jackson’s framing (in the cinematographic sense of the term as well) now takes center stage and somehow substitutes for the trials and tribulations of the two hard-boiled detectives.

2 Chester Himes’s narrative draws both on the thriller and grotesque conventions. Combining the detective novel’s brutal, mostly realistic and cynical Hammett-like tone, with a square’s grotesquely chivalrous code, it features an ambivalent structure already subverting traditional, “classic” detective fiction and its genteel codes of behavior with its relentless derision and humor. Jackson is no Chandler’s Marlowe, no knight in shining armor lost outside the courtly universe. And in Bill Duke’s version, he actually gets dangerously close to resembling one of the swindlers he’s fighting to “get his woman back”.

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The story is told in the rogue style and deals with the adventures of male and female crooks from all over Black America who mingle in its very heart, Harlem. Imabelle’s character provides the missing link between bandits and gangsters, country and town, as she temporarily leaves her black gang behind in Mississippi after it was double-crossed over a chest of stolen gold ore. The moment she sets foot in Harlem, she also sets the pace like a lone rascal (or rather some female version of the lone rider figure recurrently referred to in the film) straight from a Deep South no-man’s-land, and she starts triggering most of the action. This fundamental shift of focus somehow imposes a new corpus of rules and structural changes. Himes’s versatile style hovering between intense emotion and swift humor translates as parodic references to other genres, subverting a few “Noir” clichés on the way and somehow reformatting the canons of the detective genre.

**Imabelle Comes to Harlem**

From the long night prologue in Natchez to the first day scenes in Harlem, the representation of violence is highly stylized and Imabelle is directly connected with it as she is most often shown as both unwilling witness and catalyst. Impelling everyone around to commit crimes, she actually sets the plot dynamics. Coffin Ed and Grave Digger conversely stop being instrumental in the main plot and its inevitable series of killings, and eventually turn into grotesque doubles of their 1940s and 1950s crime film counterparts.

While Himes’s novel starts *in medias res* with the money-baking episode in Harlem, Duke chooses to concentrate on a long explanatory night sequence in the rural South where Blacks and Whites fight each other to death over stolen gold ore. The trailers only start when the southern beauty sets foot in Harlem to meet with black fence Easy Money. The mayhem and squalor of the original neighborhood are considerably downplayed while Himes insists on its isolation and destitution:

> Looking eastward from the towers of Riverside Church, perched among the university buildings on the high banks of the Hudson River, in a valley far below, waves of grey rooftops distort the perspective like the surface of a sea. Below the surface, in the murky waters of fetid tenements, a city of black people who are convulsed in desperate living, like the voracious churning of millions of hungry cannibal fish. Blind mouths eating their own guts. Stick in a hand and draw back a nub.
> That is Harlem.
> The farther east it goes, the blacker it gets (Himes, 1991, 93).

What James Weldon Johnson used to call “Black Manhattan” in the 1920s provides more than just a backdrop to the unfolding action in the narrative. It’s a direct expression of the district’s community spirit which, in turn, is a reaction to the prevailing viciousness of poverty. For Chester Himes then, Harlem is the territory and it distorts whatever it comes in contact with. Even Coffin Ed and Grave Digger who are, after all, the novel’s true heroes, eventually come out as highly farcical characters. Whatever the turns taken by the sting, they somehow magically and majestically appear but prove to be perfectly inefficient. Himes’s magnificent portrayal of the two hard-boiled cops barely corresponds to the conventions of setting and conflict of detective fiction anyway. His composite aesthetic constantly deflects its dark, disillusioned representation of crime.
They were having a big ball in the Savoy and people were lined up for a block down Lenox Avenue, waiting to buy tickets. The famous Harlem detective-team of Coffin Ed Johnson and Grave Digger Jones had been assigned to keep order. Both were tall, loose-jointed, sloppily dressed, ordinary-looking colored men. But there was nothing ordinary about their pistols. [...] Whenever anyone moved out of line, Grave Digger would shout, “Straighten up!” and Coffin Ed would echo, “Count off!” (Himes, 1991, 44.)

7 But Bill Duke makes an altogether different choice of representation. He often shoots Harlem and its dwellers in tight shots, evoking a colorful street milieu which is a cross between a supreme den of thieves and a rather convivial, self-sufficient community. Chester Himes’s humorous touches mostly resurface as somewhat labored oral and visual gags. Confined to the stereotyped role of comic law-enforcing officers, Coffin Ed and Grave Digger are doomed to deliver the same lines over and over again. The chest of gold almost functions as a full-fledged character accompanying Imabelle wherever she goes, sowing death alike in her wake. So that as the very first figure of the out-of-towner, the dame spreads the seeds of disorder in a rather benevolent suburb where petty larceny and common crimes are the rule. Harlem then is mostly used as a conventional background where the intruders are about to wreak havoc. Partly portrayed as a Film Noir or, less specifically, crime film dangerous woman, Imabelle quite literally turns into a femme fatale. Duke playfully reinvents the prototype of the dangerous female (to borrow from a Roy Del Ruth 1931 film title) peppering it with alternately light and heavy touches of eroticism. After all, she does emerge from dark, even though rural as opposed to urban, surroundings slowly making her way towards a shanty filled with gangsters about to erupt into dark and violent passions.

8 So, Imabelle steals the show at the onset. The prologue’s night sequence actually starts with a close up of her superb pair of legs. Just when she is about to prove more resourceful, intelligent and courageous than men, the film director playfully focuses on the dark side of woman’s nature. Contrary to most female characters in the gangster genre, she plays both heroine and villain with gusto. So that Bill Duke offers from the very beginning fresh nuances to the conventional crime drama extending from such wide areas as the detective genre to the gangster genre. From the incipit on, the emphasis is laid on a sophisticated mixture of (feminine) glamour, menace, bleakness and humor. Its somptuous and sensual night images and motifs (Imabelle in a red dress standing by her lover for instance, pleading for a man’s life) serve as metaphors for the traditional themes of paranoia, betrayal and steamy sex. But in the cynical and darkly parodic mood of the scene, the gangsters «neutralize» one another during the opening shooting spree filmed in mockingly hectic alternated inside and outside shots. And the archetypal private eyes are still nowhere to be seen —unless the (white) cowboys from the local police troops charging western-style the crooks inside can be defined as such. Actually, the highly stylized representation of the police cavalry rather noisily closing in on the house, with its sheriff ending up ordering the men to “[s]hoot the bastards!”, already foreshadows the parodic portrayal of detectives Coffin Ed and Grave Digger in the next section. In his sequel The Crazy Kill filled with allusions to A Rage in Harlem, Chester Himes has his character Chink refer to them as “these damned Wild West gunmen here to mess up everything” (Himes, 23).

9 So the heat is on, to borrow another one of Himes’s titles, and as in classic detective fiction and film, the gangsters are the cops’ reversed figures. But unlike most of these highly codified characters, the loner out to take revenge on society and everyone else
beside is a woman. And the western's traditional metaphoric triangle with the hero standing on top is somewhat distorted in this introductory confrontation between blacks and whites as Slim, towering above Lester and ordering his partner Jodie to “operate” on him, finally proves to be the wrong hero. At the end of the attack sequence, a quick close-up of Imabelle half-smiling at the wheel shows her driving away with a trunkful of gold, leaving mayhem behind. As the woman becomes a moving target, the treasure hunt turns literal, upsetting a few established conventions of the gangster and the western genres alike. Imabelle is a hunted down hunter let loose in the urban jungle.

Once on the other side and clearly typecast as a parodic Film Noir femme fatale, Imabelle pursues her quest in what Spencer Selby calls the “Dark City”. After the insertion of the title and cast shots, she is filmed coming to Harlem as to some conquered territory and, literally as a new Devil in a Blue Dress, since her bright blue dress functions as a humorous tribute paid to Walter Mosley’s classic detective novel.

Another leg shot imposes a visual link between the film’s two distinct sections as a second close shot of her legs at the Harlem train station mirrors the first visual chiaroscuro shot of her curvaceous body when still in Mississippi. It once more emphasizes movement. Her wilful thrust forward toward some unconfessed goal is reasserted and the heroine’s unimpeded progress ironically echoes the western hero’s as her glorious stride seems to be heralding yet other glorious deeds. But when she asks for her chest to be put in a locker, a porter meets her request with a crudely ambiguous “Whenever, wherever and however.” This first overtly sexual pun instantly deflates whatever heroic potential she may have and initiates a long series of other wordplay and visual gags which fall more into the province of situation comedy than Film Noir. Selby defines the latter as: “[a] historical, stylistic and thematic trend that took place primarily, but not exclusively, within the generic complex of the American crime film of the forties and fifties” (Selby, 1984, 1). Duke’s repeated references to it seem to be forever doomed to be defused and playfully reworked on through a number of technical devices.

Odd variations on a multifaceted frame

The birth of the heroine is then clearly laid out, but she is born again to an altogether new urban setting where fake blind men walk down the street begging for money, and where cardboard detectives look forever out of place, literally misplaced in a stylized environment of crooked business deals. Actually immediately after the series of painted city scenes with the superimposed cast and credits, another leg shot of a blind man with a white cane functions as transitional motif and barely disguised literary allusion to the writer’s final 1969 pamphlet-novel, Blind Man With a Pistol. It also somewhat heavily underlines that Imabelle has just landed in the black underworld of 1950s New York with its own rules and specific denizens. A whole string of brand-new mock-heroes then appears on screen, including Grave Digger and Coffin Ed “assigned to keep order” as Chester Himes laconically introduces them in the novel (Himes, 1989, 44). Somewhat late in the film, they ludicrously barge into Easy Money’s office holding their guns in their hands.

The notion of intrusion seems to be central to Bill Duke’s approach. He chooses to focus on the way in which an intruder, mostly Imabelle, once on the inside, disrupts even further an order that the two representatives of the law cannot maintain anyway. He has her repeatedly refer to place and territory throughout the film. To a white crook
reproaching her with “shooting up all them good white folks” in Mississippi, she answers
“Well, it comes with the territory.” And when left by herself in Easy Money’s Harlem
office, she tells him before he is arrested by the detectives “But, I got no place to stay.”
This is the beginning of a long series of chance encounters dictating the camera
movements and alternated shots of Imabelle in the street and Jackson at work in Mr.
Clay’s funeral parlor. Already categorized as a literally dangerous and fatal woman,
Imabelle is about to be labelled as the arch-seductress in the unforgettable Annual
Undertaker’s Ball sequence. After a dissolve and a close shot of the rotating skirt of a
dancer, Bill Duke delightfully films the bodies wildly balancing at the sound of
Screamin’ Jay Hawkins singing 1950s rhythm and blues. The dark tone and mood abruptly
shift to the lighter atmosphere of a Broadway musical inevitably evoking the grandiose
ball in Vincente Minnelli’s 1953 musical, The Band Wagon, with Fred Astaire and Cy
Charis. The camera moves caressingly along the vertical axis of Imabelle’s body as she
takes off her sun glasses and picks her male victim in the crowd, and the film suddenly
takes on a new comic dimension preparing for Jackson’s entrance.

The whole sequence is a highly comical parody of some musical seduction scene. In its
very use of distortion and inversion (Jackson does exactly what should not be done), it
somehow achieves the same effect as intense violence. The caricature is so extreme that
the film also becomes a murder comedy. It mostly paves the way for a series of visual gags
firmly establishing Jackson’s reputation as a god-fearing, excessively naive square, and
therefore for the second “substitution” couple, Imabelle and her smitten swain, before
halfbrother Goldy eventually makes his own late appearance.

The heroine’s trials and tribulations are now redoubled with the twists and turns of the
mock-hero’s love and professional life. The first grotesque and aborted rehearsal of the
subsequent torrid love scene between Imabelle-Robin Givens and Jackson-Forest
Whitaker definitively steers the film away from true drama towards situation comedy
with its double entendre and visual gags. While Imabelle is desperately trying to excite him,
Jackson blandly comments on his undertaker’s job: “It’s a very exciting line of work.” And
their exchange about the two portraits on Jackson’s bedroom wall is a model of the genre
as it draws a great deal of varying comments on the very same topic (including from the
most hard-boiled group of gangsters later on in the film):

Imabelle: “Who’s that?”
Jackson: [With a foolish smile] “Well, that’s Jesus.”
Imabelle: “No, honey. I know who Jesus is. The other one.”
Jackson: [Close-up on his masculine-looking mother] “Ah, that’s my ma. She’s dead
now.”

With these farcical incidents in the life of a law-abiding citizen, Duke also outlines the
limits of his own approach and, above all, of his own representation of violence. As in
what W. M. Frohock used to call the novel of violence in America in the 1920s and 1930s which considerably influenced the Afro-American novel, violence has a purely aesthetic function. In other words, it no longer operates in the film as the distinctive index of human nature designed to expose the darker side of the American Dream. It just is one of the signs of excess in a world where real goals or lonely male crusaders (or lovely ones as Himes would say) no longer exist, except perhaps for the love-driven Jackson. Duke is not out, like Himes in his first stinging portrayal of institutional and individual racism, *If He Hollers Let Him Go*, to articulate in brutal, powerful language the psychology of the urban male. The film’s general surplus of desire, the easy equation between life and death, the absence of any major male figure (there truly is a multiplicity of so-called «heroes», and even Imabelle’s ex-lover, the especially sinister villain Slim, quotes nursery rhymes when getting ready to kill), all point at a universe ruled by transgression for transgression’s sake, where a woman is precisely all the rage. Playing with a few clichés and genres may then well be the director’s way of adapting the very notion of transgression and of exposing the monstrous/joyous faces of disorder and infringement of the law.

17 His mixing different genres and rhythms consistently provides various frames, and certainly unexpected ones, for this succession of sometimes boisterous and endearing action sequences. Even the religious fervor of Harlemites is transposed into the conventional setting of a western showdown for instance. When Imabelle is shot in medium close up attending mass with Jackson, the holy trinity of gangsters looking for her, Jodie, Slim in the center, and Hanks, magically appears framed by the church threshold as in a saloon doorway before a major confrontation between hero(ine) and villains. Once more suspense builds up, sustained by the heavily dramatic soundtrack, to be immediately defused in the next scene. When she returns to Jackson’s room by herself, Imabelle barges into Slim and his two partners who decide to take Jackson “for everything he’s got, or...” The camera makes up for the ellipsis as it closes in on Jodie who theatrically pulls his knife and steals Slim’s favorite line, “Pop go the weasel!”

18 Comedy of repetition takes precedence here over the next turns of the swindle. The money-baking episode is rapidly evoked by the gang before the same comic scene about the two pictures on the wall is smuggled in again, becoming each time more explicit, as all four accomplices burst out laughing and Jodie sententiously comments on Jackson’s mother: “That’s an ugly bitch!” Later on in the movie, the two detectives will pick up the very same words under similar circumstances, further emphasizing that the distinctions between cops and gangsters are utterly blurred. The dividing line is actually so thin that it is virtually erased as Jackson’s transition from doggedly pious naïf into enamoured pragmatist leads him in turn to repeatedly break the law. He does so mostly in parodic night sequences (with some memorable car chases through Harlem streets and complex ground-level or high-angle shots of gangsters’ cars coming in and out) heavily resting on Film Noir’s bleak, brooding atmosphere and dark, doom-laden urban scenes. But only some of the components of Noir style resurface in these tense and brutal sequences which reinstate the enigmatic feel of the dilapidated city at night of great classics like *The Maltese Falcon* (Dashiell Hammett; John Huston, 1941) or *The Big Sleep* (Raymond Chandler; Howard Hawks, 1946).
An unconventional robbers-and-robbers skit?

But precisely, the usually significant motifs of the noir movement and its artistic roots, German Expressionism, French “poetic realism” and the hardboiled tradition in American literature, derived from postwar disillusionment and realism, seem to become inconsequential in Duke’s movie. Quoting French film analyst Raymond Durgnat’s *The Family Tree of Film Noir*, Spencer Selby insists that Film Noir is not a genre but a style: “It is not defined, as are the western and gangster genres, by conventions of setting and conflict, but rather by the more subtle qualities of tone and mood” (Selby, 1984, 1). It may be difficult however to spot any type of sustained reference to the real conventions of a specific genre in the director’s multidimensional representation of this shady world and its denizens. As Jonathan Romney commenting on his adaptation says: “Quite apart from the relegation of Himes’s regular heroes Coffin Ed and Grave Digger to a marginal role, his grim humor is transmuted here into a sometimes laboured flipness” (Romney, 1991, 47).

Even the treatment of violence borders on flippancy as it is choreographed at the fast and occasionally pulsating pace of a Broadway musical. And its very extremity in the novel too often becomes a glib, inconsequential brutality in the movie. Unlike in the western and gangster films, its founding violence is not expelled once the community has been fully established, it is recycled over and over again, endlessly reformatted. So that from the introductory sequence’s classicism in violence (in the style of Robert Aldrich’s fast-pace 1955 *Kiss Me Deadly* or Samuel Fuller), Duke moves on to an eventually arguable use of it. The wild shooting spree in the dark at a Harlem hideout, when Jackson and half-brother Goldy, posing as policemen, break in on Slim and his henchmen seems for instance to be the mere replica of the original Cowboys and Indians raid in the prologue. Once more, the two cops arriving late on the crime scene sabotage the whole operation so that, again, everyone gets off remarkably lightly. The darker and desperate significance of Himes’s violent ghetto scenes is somewhat lost in these episodes repeatedly structured as micro-sequences with a happy ending despite their staple violence.

The final show in Easy Money’s office stages a playful jamming of codes as well as the same forms of somewhat systematic, -as opposed to motivated, violence. Slim and the fence conclude their deal but fall out, and the ensuing gunfight culminates in a collage, or rather pasting together, of two very diverse imitated styles and classic genre scenes. The first one, when Easy Money’s cherished dog is held at gunpoint by Slim and then crushed against the wall by Goldy, is directly derived from situation comedy. The second one, when Slim wrestles with Imabelle and pulls a knife on her while she is trying to run away, functions as a highly codified Film Noir staircase scene. In the *The Maltese Falcon’s* last scene before the final fade-out for instance, beautiful and dangerous Brigid O’Shaughnessy is proleptically framed by the bars of the elevator grill whose shadow is projected onto her face while Sam Spade walks down the stairs. Duke chooses to film his own femme fatale in a horizontal shot. As she is locked in a life-and-death struggle with her aggressor, her frantic shadow and the bannister bars as well are reflected against the backdrop of the wall.

During the last “love” triangle between the arch-villain, the mock-hero and the seductress at the nightclub, Imabelle eventually shoots Slim, saving Jackson’s life. The various oblique and low angle shots of the square fighting his hard-boiled opponent bare-handed while quoting the bible subvert the traditional formulary structure of its western
model. Jackson comes out of it alive merely because the formula demands that the hero come out of it alive. In other words, he gets off on a technicality of genre requirement but Imabelle eludes him one more time and he is sent to jail by the two cardboard detectives for robbing his boss. The three-shot of the new family members briefly and ostentatiously reunited, Goldy, Jackson and Imabelle, ironically precedes a shot of Slim’s deserted body lying across the dance floor. This is the last time that Bill Duke yields to what could be called the questionable temptation of violence. He radically veers away from Chester Himes’s troubling mixture of irony and despair, where most of the villains as well as Goldy as sacrificial victim suffer violent deaths, to tread the more conventional path of a Hollywood relatively happy ending.

The conflict with the villain has been partly resolved through the heroine’s intervention. But the effect achieved by this ultimate reference to the traditional structure of the western film (which includes acknowledgement of a conflict of some sort [agon], deadly fight [pathos] and eventual recognition that the monster had to be killed in order for the community to enjoy peace and prosperity) is not quite one of full restoration of order and happiness. The woman, who is still endowed with a highly ambivalent status, decides on the lone rider’s course and leaves all but part of the money behind. The two brothers’ cliché reconciliation scene on the station platform functions as an ironical re-enactment of the previous family reunion. And the Harlem crooks stay in Harlem (including the fake blind man’s figure completing the show) while the last of the Mississippi gangsters, sitting on a blue train seat in a decidedly white dress, goes back home. As Goldy, a true wanderer of the urban wasteland, cryptically tells Jackson filmed in a medium shot heroically running toward his departing belle: “Good luck, brother. You’re gonna need it!”

Bill Duke’s return to conventions in the epilogue is an index of his constant interfering and at times tampering with various codes and genres. Evil in his film is by no means the corrupt city’s sorry privilege. And his use of violence is often repetitive at the risk of lapsing into senseless brutality, in a logic sometimes at odds with Chester Himes’s meaningful even though violent pantomimes and macabre dances.

But then the very flippancy of Duke’s style endows the movie with a literally thrilling rhythm irresistibly evoking some great Broadway musicals. Paradoxically, the fact that he uses the burlesque and stereotyping to excess, consistently highlighting the discrepancy between theme and style, allows him to focalize on detail and often reach the intensity of Himes’s minute portrayal of characters. The detective’s quest and triumph may not be at the center of his own cynical universe, but by reassembling a surprising medley of genres and movements and consequently modifying the canon, he somehow paves the way for a definitely idiosyncratic form of Noir and detective film. In this underworld which blurs the distinctions between good and evil and where one needs a badge to tell cop from criminal, hero from villain there are neither gentlemen nor true heroes. As Philip Marlowe pessimistically says in The Big Sleep: “Knights have no meaning in this game. It wasn’t a game for knights” (Chandler, 1948, 153).

But it is entertainment altogether.
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Works Cited


NOTES

1. In this other detective novel, Himes has the pair fully fonction as upholders of the law:
   “All that’s missing is just one link,” Grave Digger went on. “What it was that Val had on Johnny that was worth ten G’s. If we had that we’d have it chained down.
   “Yeah, but without it the dog’s running loose,” Coffin Ed replied. (Himes, 1989, 110).
2. Ironically enough, in quite a few shots Imabelle wears a highly suggestive red dress after the actual song title Devil in a Red Dress which Walter Mosley himself adapted for the purpose of his book.
3. At the end of *A Rage in Harlem*, before the southern gangsters get killed, Himes uses these phrases to describe a scene of intense violence which becomes significant in its very excessiveness and stylization:

The girl didn’t cry out, didn’t utter a sound, didn’t faint. Her body went flaccid beneath Jodie’s grip. Her face was stretched into distortion, a drop of blood trickled slowly down her taut neck. Her eyes were huge black pools of animal terror, slanting upwards at the edges, overwhelming her small distorted face. She didn’t breathe. [...] Hank stared at Grave Digger dreamily without moving, his fingers still curled about the butt of the hidden .38. Grave Digger stared back. [...] Everything was in pantomime. The girl backed with [Jodie], followed his every motion with a corresponding motion, as if performing some macabre dance. (147)

ABSTRACTS

Chester Himes’s novel *A Rage in Harlem*, published in 1957 in the U. S. as *For Love of Imabelle*, was adapted in 1991 by Black actor Bill Duke. As he said in some interviews, it was a true challenge to work on one of Himes’s books because of his love of meticulously described characters, his extremely compact writing and his style hovering between intense emotion and swift humor. The film may not be a first-rate one but its selection of flamboyant characters and of specific sections of the plot, as well as its parody of the western genre and reminiscences of Broadway musicals somehow modify the canon of the detective film.

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Solibo Magnifique de Patrick Chamoiseau : dans la « mangrove policière »

Dominique Chancé

1 Le mot mangrove désigne un milieu naturel typique des régions tropicales. Dans la mangrove, appelée également mangle, les palétuviers développent des racines qui s’enfoncent loin dans la mer, semblant tresser entre ciel et eau un panier de branches. Les oiseaux et les huîtres s’y nourrissent, faisant de ce milieu un biotope extrêmement fécond. La mangrove est souvent évoquée par les auteurs antillais pour symboliser un espace identitaire dont les valeurs sont discutées. Ainsi, pour Aimé Césaire, la mangrove est « méphitique », pour Maryse Condé, on y meurt, « on s’empale dans les racines des palétuviers. On s’enterre et on étouffe dans la boue saumâtre » (Maryse Condé, 1989, 192).

2 À l’inverse, selon Chamoiseau, la mangrove est un berceau de vie, un milieu caractéristique qui symbolise la créolité comme entrecroisement, mélange d’éléments hybrides qui crée la vie. Éloge de la créolité évoque la mangrove comme symbole et Texaco est tout entier construit autour d’une métaphore de la ville créole comme « mangrove urbaine ». Toutefois, Chamoiseau, lui-même, hésite puisqu’il caractérise le piège policier qui se referme sur de pauvres djobeurs, en une soirée de carnaval, de « mangrove policière ». En fait, le roman de Patrick Chamoiseau hésite moins qu’il ne construit précisément l’ambivalence d’un milieu, dans lequel la police elle-même cesse d’être considérée comme l’autre, l’ennemi radical, pour devenir un élément à part entière de la créolité. C’est pourquoi nous avons repris cette expression, présente dans le roman, pour caractériser sa singularité comme roman paradoxal, où la police, après avoir été instrument de clivage, devient l’enjeu d’une cohérence culturelle, dans la mosaïque créole.
Les enjeux de la réflexion

3 Si, en effet, le roman policier exerce des clivages, procède par dichotomies, entre le mort et les vivants, entre les innocents et le coupable, entre la police et les suspects, entre les individus et les groupes que séparent des haines et des conflits d'intérêt, le roman de Patrick Chamoiseau décrit bien une « mangrove policière », dangereuse, mortifère, en inscrivant son roman dans une perspective anticolonialiste. Il se rapproche, en cela, d'un Adiaffi qui, dans *La carte d'identité*, mettait en scène un Africain vénérable, victime d'une police coloniale cruelle et stupide qui l'avilissait, l'insultait, le torturait sans raison. Dans une perspective anti-colonialiste, le « nous », exclusif, définit une communauté, par opposition à ses oppresseurs, à ses ennemis (problématique somme toute traditionnelle des littératures nationalistes). Il peut également désigner une communauté noire, par opposition aux blancs et/ou aux mulâtres, ou encore l'ensemble du peuple paysan, ouvrier, face aux oppresseurs bourgeois. Si la police était représentée par des blancs métropolitains, par exemple, cela simplifierait les clivages. Mais il n'en est rien.

4 En fait le projet de la « créolité », définie dans *Éloge* comme un « agrégat » vivant et contradictoire, dépasse les clivages binaires, en intégrant une véritable diversité. Le roman va montrer une police plus complexe, bigarrée, contradictoire et somme toute populaire. D'une police coloniale, il va faire une police plus locale, plus typique, il va la régionaliser ou l'acclimater : en un mot, elle va devenir l'une des composantes d'un monde complexe et contradictoire, multiple, traversé par des conflits parfois violents, mais cohérent culturellement : créole.

Rappel des événements

5 À la fin du carnaval, à Fort-de-France, sur la place de la Savane, un vieux conteur nommé Solibo est venu passer la nuit, entouré de ses amis qui l'écoutent et rythment sa parole au son du Ka. Ce sont des djobeurs, personnages sans statut social clairement reconnu par la société française, artisans, pêcheurs, commerçants, hommes de peine, un écrivain, un joueur de tambour, une prostituée, des marchandes, souvent en marge, parce qu'ils exercent des métiers en voie de disparition ou ont des activités temporaires, voire illicites. Le conteur soudain se tait. Il est mort d'une « égorgette de la parole ». On va chercher de l'aide, la police arrive sur les lieux et fait immédiatement l'hypothèse d'un crime, ne sachant pas ce qu'est une « égorgette de la parole ». Tout le monde est suspect, la garde à vue et les interrogatoires commencent. En fait, les témoins se dérobent le plus souvent aux questions policières, préférant évoquer la figure du conteur telle qu'ils l'ont connu, en faire un portrait plein de respect et d'admiration. Les moments d'attente sont propices à des évoquations émues et souvent poétiques de Solibo.

6 Le roman oppose alors, dans une dichotomie assez tranchée les suspects, djobeurs qu'unissent un même sort, une même position sociale, une même histoire partagée avec le conteur qu'ils ont accompagné symboliquement jusqu'à sa mort, et une même peur. Le narrateur, se nommant Cham, Oiseau de Cham, parfois Chamoiseau, ou Chanzibié est un, parmi les suspects et les djobeurs. Il dit « nous » et représente toujours la collectivité des djobeurs, unie par la parole : « toutes les dépositions furent les mêmes », par les attitudes, les souvenirs partagés, les reprises textuelles, les peurs et les pleurs. Ainsi, la collectivité créole se dessine, en face d'une police violente, portéeuse des lois et du langage.
colonialiste ou néocolonialiste. C'est la « mangrove policière », dangereuse et mortifère (97).

**Une « mangrove policière »**

Tout opposé, en effet, le petit peuple créole rassemblé dans le « panier à salade » ou sur la savane, à cette police qui se manifeste d'abord par un langage, ou une langue étrange : le procès-verbal. Ce procès-verbal précède le récit lui-même. Le récit mené par le narrateur se voudra « parole », le procèsverbal est « avant la parole », un « écrit du malheur ». C'est un écrit en français administratif, caricatural, sans sujet, sans humanité dans lequel les matricules remplacent les personnes. La description est ridiculement précise, objective, elle se nourrit de constats, entasse les objets sans donner d'impression générale ni de sens, elle ne saisit qu'un cadavre et des déchets. Quand le « nous » est employé, c'est un nous d'auteur officiel, légal, a-subjectif.

Cette police qui emploie le français le plus formel et le plus mort sert une loi qui est ressentie comme étrangère : « la loi sort de France et quand elle arrive au pays, même si on la connaît, on n'est pas obligé de la re-connaître », déclare Bouaffesse, qui mène l’enquête (135). Bouaffesse, le brigadier-chef, se sert du français et de la loi française, mais en les pervertissant le plus souvent, en les caricaturant ou en les dénaturant. La langue française, écrite, devient le « français mathématique », des schémas, des imprimés, « des notes de synthèse », des remarques illisibles, des points, des étoiles, des petites croix, des « signes cabalistiques », un arsenal guerrier : L'inspecteur Pilon trace des « schémas avec des flèches montantes et des flèches descendantes » en une « inquiétante géométrie » (168). Cette langue, qui vient du « pays de Descartes », selon l'expression du narrateur, symbolise la méthode rationaliste employée par une police « assimilée » qui ne veut croire qu'à la réalité visible, aux explications logiques, aux mobiles psychologiques, aux approches scientifiques comme l'autopsie, qui aimerait, à l'instar de Pilon, « un mystère tracé au compas (et à l'équerre) » (118). La police est le vecteur d'une culture exogène qui méconnaît la culture locale, déshonore et tue les principaux représentants de celle-ci.

La langue française et les méthodes « cartésiennes » sont utilisées comme une arme contre le nègre Congo, le plus vieux, le plus authentique des personnages, ne parlant que le créole. Bouaffesse, brigadier-chef qui mène la bataille, utilise une technique assez spéciale :

afin de coincer ce vieux nègre vicieux, il fallait le traquer au français. Le français engourdissait leur tête, gripe leur viscérot, et ils dérapent comme des rhumiers sur les dalles du pavé. En seize ans de carrière, le brigadier-chef avait largement éprouvé cette technique aussi efficace que les coups de dictionnaire sur le crâne. (105).

Le vieux Congo sera effectivement torturé au français, recevra des coups de registre sur la tête, avant de se suicider en se jetant par le fenêtre (203). Il n'y a qu'un crime commis dans ce roman policier, c'est celui-là : la police pousse le nègre Congo au suicide à force de mauvais traitements. La torture infligée à Congo est atroce, en effet :

ils le firent mettre à nu, s'agenouiller sur une règle carrée, ils lui martelèrent le crâne et les oreilles avec de gros annuaires, ils lui donnèrent des coups de pied, le firent ramper sous les chaises de bureau, ils lui cognèrent le foie, les graines, la nuque, ils lui écrasèrent les doigts et l'aveuglèrent avec leurs pouces. (206).
Dès lors, il n’est pas étonnant que la police suggère les « chasseurs des bois d’aux jours de l’esclavage, les chiens à marronnage, la milice des alentours d’habitation, les commandeurs des champs, les gendarmes à cheval, les marins de Vichy du temps de l’Amiral, toute une Force qui inscrit dans la mémoire collective l’unique attestation de notre histoire : Po la poliiice ! » (83)

En face de la police, héritière des forces esclavagistes et coloniales, voire pétainistes, se dessine un « nous », « notre histoire ». Le « nous » prend existence dans cette opposition qui en fait la victime apeurée de forces écrasantes. Bouaffesse, le brigadier-chef est, dit le narrateur, “du bois des chefs. Sur le bateau négrier c’est lui qui nous aurait baignés à l’eau de mer, désinfecté la cale au vinaigre bouilli, nous aurait frottés d’huile un peu avant la vente. Sur l’habitation, il eût été celui qui donnait la cadence du travail au champ, puis, plus tard, commandeur (58). Ces policiers, bien que noirs, ne font que s’inscrire dans l’ordre colonial, « du côté du manche », ils n’auraient même pas pu « commander une troupe de marrons ».

Ailleurs, Bouaffesse est représenté sur « une kodak » : « les mains sur les hanches, une position qu’il affectionne et il pose un pied sur le cercueil comme dans les vieilles images de chasse coloniales (objets probables de son émervellement), souligne le narrateur » (57, 58). La police symbolise, par conséquent, les violences colonialistes et esclavagistes, continues dans l’ordre légal et linguistique à la française, l’univers réglementaire qui est responsable de la mort de la culture antillaise. Elle tue le vieux nègre Congo, l’un des représentants éminents d’une culture ancestrale liée au manioc et au parler créole, elle terrorise les autres suspects, humilié le kouli joueur de tambour, Sucette. Elle empêche de veiller Solibo le conteur dignement, et fait découper ses organes, réduisant son corps à un objet d’observation scientificalégal abject (214). L’un des personnages rapporte comment, par le passé, la police aurait pu faire obstacle à la veillée de Man Gnam, une vieille marchande vénérée, si Solibo n’avait été là pour éviter « la morgue [...] la gaule blanche des indigents d’hôpitaux et le latin automatique d’un abbé de passage » (156).

Solibo, arrivé à temps, avant la police, organise une veillée fervente. Mais des « nègres bien élevés » vitupèrent contre le bruit et appellent la police qui demande : « Comment s’appelle la vagabonnagerie que vous faites là han ! ». L’ordre à la française, assimilé, s’oppose alors à la façon de vivre et de mourir créole. Une première patrouille sera neutralisée, envoutée par la parole de Solibo, mais une seconde patrouille, « dirigée par un commissaire français » désenvoûte les premiers policiers, « distribu [e] cent coups de boutou, et embarque une queue de nègres sagnants dont Solibo lui-même » (158-159). La police est perçue comme l’obstacle majeur à la perpétuation des traditions, encore plus lorsqu’elle est dirigée par des Français, cela va de soi.

Ainsi se continue un ordre binaire dans lequel se constitue une communauté, héritée de Chronique des sept misères, petit peuple de djobeurs créolophones, multiracial dans Solibo, uni par un ensemble d’intérêts symbolisés par le conteur, les plats typiques de la cuisine créole, et son statut de victime de la police. La seule différence avec la communauté très soudée de Chronique serait le fait que les djobeurs ne sont pas tous noirs, qu’un Syrien, un Indien-kouli et une Colombienne se sont glissés dans la troupe, ainsi qu’un écrivain. En dehors de cela, la collectivité pourrait paraître assez simplement définie, dans un univers fortement dichotomique. C’est au nom de tels schémas simplistes qu’on a parfois accusé Chamoiseau et Confiant de prôner une nouvelle idéologie tout aussi sectaire que le négrisme qu’ils combattaient. De nombreux critiques se sont étonnés d’un projet qui
valoriseraient le pur créole, le créole fondamental (après le nègre fondamental), qui serait pauvre, marginal, djobeur, laissé pour compte des villes modernes, mangeur de morue, de requin et d'ignames, solidaire et illettré le plus souvent.

En fait, il n'en est rien, et la communauté, on va le voir, se scinde pour se recomposer dans un univers beaucoup plus complexe et nuancé qui englobe en réalité la police noire et finalement créole elle aussi. On l'a vu, la patrouille qui vient interrompre la veillée de Man Gnam parle dans un français largement créolisé : « comment s'appelle la vagabonnagerie que vous faites là han » et demeure médusée par le parole du conteur. La police à la française, quant à elle, utilise le boutou pour remettre de l'ordre. Mais, dans l'affaire Solibo, il n'y a plus d'officier français : le brigadier-chef Bouaffesse comme l'inspecteur Pilon sont noirs et d'ici, ils mêlent les méthodes et le langage à la française, la violence et la truculence, dans un mélange détonnant qui parfois scandalise le lecteur et finalement l'amène à un jugement nuancé sur des personnages contradictoires et somme toute sympathiques.

**Une police “d'ici”**

Les policiers Bouaffesse et Evariste Pilon sont, tout autant que Solibo le conteur dont la mort est au centre de l'intrigue, les personnages principaux de ce roman. Leurs portraits, leurs agissements intéressent le narrateur qui en fait une description importante par la quantité de textes qui leur sont consacrés. Ils sont en fait beaucoup plus individualisés que les autres personnages, témoins dans l'affaire et qui n'apparaissent guère qu'en groupe ou dans leurs proximités. Pour des raisons tactiques, le narrateur ne tient pas à personnaliser les témoins qui ne sont qu'un même peuple, un seul nous. Ils sont le même en plusieurs, déclinaison d'un unique modèle. À l'inverse, le groupe des policiers est assez divers et les individus s'y détachent dans leur singularité. C'est un défaut, car cela prouve qu'ils ne sont pas capables de se fondre dans une communauté, mais c'est intéressant pour le lecteur et cela leur donne beaucoup de relief, de pittoresque.

**Bouaffesse**

Bouaffesse, le brigadier-chef au nom en forme de surnom, est du bois dont on fait les chefs, du bois de fesse, dit son surnom par dérision. Il est dur, il a les fesses en bois, c'est un homme sans pitié. Il stigmatise toute l'horreur policière, la brutalité, les coups, « il westernise », il est vulgaire, « il se gratte les fesses à deux mains » (108, 112). Mais cette vulgarité même n'est pas sans ambiguïté, elle en fait un personnage rabelaisien, porteur non seulement de l'horreur et de la violence, mais également du comique carnavalaire. Il est également doué d'une aura, d'un pouvoir incontestable et mystérieux. L'inspecteur Pilon, pourtant son supérieur hiérarchique, le regarde avec perplexité : « Bouaffesse a parlé avec force. Inerte, l'inspecteur principal l'observe comme s'il le découvrait. L'influence incroyable de ce mâle-nègre l'a, d'emblée, dépossédé de l'enquête » (211). Bouaffesse est un « mâle-nègre », un personnage impressionnant.

Tous ses traits ne sont pas négatifs. Il est séducteur et rusé. Le roman commence presque par l'exposé de ses hauts faits de séducteur. En effet, lorsque les djobeurs s'aperçoivent que Solibo est mort, la panique leur fait commettre une erreur fatale, ils vont demander l'aide de la police. C'est la marchande Doudou-Ménar qui se charge de prévenir la police.
Or, lorsqu'elle arrive au commissariat, prête à faire un scandale parce qu'on ne l'écoute pas, elle reconnaît Bouaffesse comme l'un de ses anciens galants. Lui-même reconnaît en cette grosse marchande Lolita Boidevan, qu'il avait rencontrée autrefois dans un dancing. Ce que le narrateur nomme le « charroi de la belle » est amplement raconté, dans un style à la fois épineux et comique (59-63). Ce passage ne contribue pas seulement à faire de Bouaffesse un personnage pittoresque, il en fait l'emblème de la culture créole, maître d'une stratégie de séduction qui pour être cynique n'en est pas moins efficace. La jubilation d'écriture dans ce passage, ne peut que rendre le personnage sympathique, ou du moins haut en couleur, à la façon d'un Panurge. De plus, Bouaffesse séduit immédiatement Doudou-Ménar qui murmure : « Ô Phlégon, tu as toujours les yeux clairs, hein... Le brigadier-chef, déjà congestionné, ne répondit ni tu ni il, mais précisa la caresse » (65).

Après avoir koké Doudou-Ménar dans son bureau, tandis que le policier de faction imagine avec envie les ébats qu'il devine, les amoureux sortent. Doudou Ménar, « assise à l'arrière du car... est fascinée ». Elle se sent légitimée :

Elle comprend avoir vécu comme nous tous en décalage, sur ces sentiers qui tracent un autre pays sur les routes coloniales. Alors il faut comprendre : dans le car qui roule vers Solibo et nous, Doudou-Ménar, légalisée est fière (67).

La position du narrateur indique une bienveillante compréhension vis-à-vis de personnages qui sont ressentis comme exemplaires d'une expérience collective. L'histoire familiale de Bouaffesse est également typique d'un Martiniquais (54). Fils bâtard d'un certain Pierre-Jacques Gros-Désors, il est déclaré par un nommé Bouaffesse qui disparaît, « à la poursuite du soleil couchant ». Il "ne fut jamais que le numéro seize du décompte d'enfants-dehors" que son géniteur « établissait tous les neuf mois en compétition avec celui de ses amis ». Le psychologue scolaire qui s'intéressera à son cas sera très déconcerté parce qu'il répondait identiquement « à la question mère ? et à celle de Père ? : 'Stéphanise Laguinée'. » Il a épousé une koulie après avoir « vérifié à dix reprises qu'elle pouvait enfanter [...] sans un zouc ni un pâté en pot ». Le personnage n'est ni généreux, ni noble, il n'a pas les vertus sociales et morales de Solibo. Peut-être manque-t-il de culture et s'avère-t-il incapable de mettre les formes nécessaires, le sens et l'esthétique qui devraient accompagner les actes de la vie. À l'inverse, Solibo, personnages solidaire, généreux, humble pour lui-même, est un artiste. Lorsqu'il cuisine un « touffé-requin », il connaît les gestes, les secrets qui font d'un simple repas l'expression d'un art de vivre et de la beauté. Il faut sans doute lire les deux portraits en opposition, Bouaffesse est l'anti-Solibo par bien des aspects.

Pourtant, ce personnage ridicule, effrayant, est en même temps spirituel et créole. Car il parle le créole, et le comprend, il traduit les réponses des témoins créolophones. Il s'étonne même que Pilon qui défend le créole, l'appelle non un patois, mais une langue, ne l'emploie pas : « Et si c'est une langue, pourquoi ta bouche roule toujours un petit français huilé ? Et pourquoi tu n'écris pas ton procès-verbal avec ? » (143). Son parler, quant à lui, est fortement créolisé : « Alignez votre corps avec les spectateurs, souplé », intime-t-il à Doudou-Ménar. « Messieurs les pompiers, approchez par ici, souplé,... je dois vous expédier en geole glouf... » (96-97). « Yo pri », s'exclame-t-il à plusieurs reprises, certain d'avoir une preuve : « on les a » (177). Lorsqu'il fait son récit mensonger de la mort de Congo, il émaille son discours de locutions créoles : « je lui tends la main, il mord ma main et dérape flap ! et donne descendre comme un mangot en bonne saison... » (212). Il ponctue son discours de « han », « Awa ! », de « ces messieurs-la » qui est un pluriel créole

Le narrateur est dans une position ambiguë par rapport à ce personnage tantôt odieux et tantôt comique, il en cite les traits d’humour dont certains paraissent assez spirituels au lecteur tout en le mettant en garde : « Il était bon d’apprécier l’humour de Bouaffesse, et encore mieux qu’il le sache. Chariot [témoin interpellé qui vient d’essuyer des remarques ironiques de la part de Bouaffesse, en raison de sa position], en rajouta un peu : plié, mains sur le ventre... il se roulait dans la poussière. Or, la sagesse prévient : trop de sel gâte la soupe ! Le Brigadier-chef lui abattit son boutou sur les reins en hurlant : ‘Ou ka fè lafèt épi mwen, tu te moques de moi !’ » (97). On peut contester l’humour de Bouaffesse ou savoir que les rieurs sont aussi des flatteurs a peurés ou hypocrites, mais Bouaffesse n’est pas un imbécile. Il sait quand on se moque de lui. Une telle scène permet d’appréhender la complexité d’un personnage parfois amusant, souvent violent, autoritaire et terrifiant, et toutefois proche de la culture populaire par son origine, sa langue, ses références.

L’inspecteur Pilon ne partage pas cette culture populaire, c’est un nègre savant, un petit-bourgeois qui cependant n’est pas un étranger. Il se rapproche à la fin du roman du narrateur Chamoiseau et, dans son portrait initial, on peut déjà saisir les traits d’un personnage complexe, contradictoire.

Évariste Pilon

Éloge de la créolité insiste sur ce point, la question de définition ne reçoit pas de réponse, la créolité n’est pas une identité mais une « question à vivre » dans un lieu nommé « ici ». C’est dire qu’être créole n’est pas facile, c’est se poser des questions, s’interroger sur son lieu, sa culture, son identité, sans avoir de réponses. C’est être en butte à de douloureuses contradictions. Ainsi, l’inspecteur Pilon « pétitionne pour le créole à l’école et sursaute quand ses enfants l’emploient en s’adressant à lui » on ne le surprendra guère à employer le créole dans les dialogues, même s’il dit le comprendre. Il est de cette couche sociale et culturelle qui le défend par idéologie mais ne le pratique guère. De même, il « sacre Césaire grand poète sans l’avoir jamais lu... refuse le sapin de noël et enneige son arbus... cultive un sanglot pour l’Indépendance, un battement de cœur sur l’Autonomie, tout le reste sur la Départementalisation, final, vit comme nous tous, à deux vitesses, sans trop savoir si faut freiner dans le morne ou accélérer dans la descente » (119). L’inspecteur Pilon n’est donc pas l’ennemi, l’Autre honni, la police : il incarne une contradiction partagée par « nous tous ».

S’il est un personnage auquel ressemble l’inspecteur Pilon, c’est le narrateur, celui qui, à l’autre bout de l’enquête écrit également, en vain, lui aussi, car si l’enquête de police menée par Pilon échoue, l’enquête ethnologique du narrateur échoue également, ses écritures ne peuvent, d’après sa propre déploration, rien conserver de la parole du conteur tandis que l’enquête de police sera inapte à conserver la moindre parcelle de vérité sur Solibo. Les deux personnages se rencontrent, tous les deux cultivés, ils ont également compris l’importance du conteur et c’est l’inspecteur Pilon qui demande au narrateur d’écrire un texte qui témoigne de la parole du conteur. Il est en quelque sorte le commanditaire du roman, ou du moins du texte qui en résulte : les « dits de Solibo » placés en épilogue. Ainsi, ce personnage qui était du côté de l’oppression, de l’appareil policier, toujours aux côtés de Bouaffesse même s’il n’emploie pas ses méthodes et demeure en retrait, sans rien empêcher cependant, devient le double du narrateur et tient un discours en miroir de celui du « marqueur de paroles ». Il a « mené une enquête toute personnelle (et inoffensive) sur les conteurs et sur celui qui, à ses yeux, en était le symbole. Il [a] appris une grande part de l’histoire du conteur et de son dépérissement social » (222). Il emploie un langage que ne désavouerait pas le narrateur : « Nul n’en vit le désarroi dans son élocution, c’était si peu : un bourgeon de silence, une coulure dans le mot, le frisson d’une lèvre que la peur habitait » (223). L’inspecteur est devenu poète. Il décrit en ces termes le conteur sur sa fin : « on lui entendit de ces rires qui sont des tragédies. On lui surprit de ces sourires sans âme où les yeux sont abîmes » (224). Et c’est bien à Evariste Pilon que le narrateur remet le texte longuement, difficilement concocté des « dits de Solibo » qu’il considère comme une « affligeante écriture ». Devant Bouaffesse et Pilon qui écoutent « religieusement », le narrateur-personnage récite son texte avant que celui-ci soit joint au dossier. Là encore, l’ambiguïté est totale, car le narrateur considère son texte comme un échec « affligeant » qui ne vaut guère mieux que « le gros dossier de merde » de la police. En fait, les deux démarches se rejoignent dans l’échec et la prise de conscience d’une faillite.

Finalement, dans une ultime déploration, le narrateur, persuadé que son entreprise d’écriture a échoué à restituer la parole de Solibo le conteur, est rejoint par les policiers : « ils avaient découvert que cet homme était la vibration d’un monde finissant, pleine de douleur, qui n’aura pour réceptacle que les vents et les mémoires indifférentes, et dont tout cela n’avait bordé que la simple onde du souffle ultime » (227). Par conséquent, si le roman est un roman d’initiation, c’est la police qui s’y trouve initiée, ce sont Bouaffesse et
Pilon qui « découvrent », comprennent, rejoignent leur créolité, sous la forme de questions essentielles sur le conteur, sous le regard à la fois révolté et complice du narrateur.

29 En effet, les deux policiers ont dû peu à peu admettre tout ce qu’ils refusaient au début de l’enquête, et en particulier abandonner leur cartésianisme. Ils verront d’abord la manifestation du merveilleux tropical lorsque le corps de Solibo d’abord si lourd que plusieurs policiers ne peuvent le lever deviendra si léger que le Brigadier-chef le fera passer d’un doigt à l’autre, sans se lasser du prodige (138-154). Évariste Pilon, si cartésien, « redécouvrit (in situ) un des mystères de par ici », commente le narrateur. Plus tard, ils découvriront que des fourmis-maniocs, espèce qui n’existe qu’en Guadeloupe, entourent le corps de Solibo qui repose sur la Savane, à Fort-de-France, Martinique. Bouaffesse et Pilon finiront par aller consulter un quimboiseur : « aux arrières du pays, vers le fondoc du bois, c’est-à-dire au plus loin », dit le narrateur, symbolisant par là le retour aux sources, aux origines les plus secrètes. Pilon trouve « cette démarche ridicule », mais « il ne put réprimer une avidité quand le vieillard, sans même réfléchir,... leur souffla sa connaissance de l’égorgette de la parole » (218). Alors qu’ils se refusaient à accepter qu’on pût mourir d’une « égorgette de la parole » et cherchaient une cause rationnelle, un crime et un criminel, ils devront se rendre à l’évidence : la mort demeurera inexplicable scientifiquement et ne trouvera de cause que symbolique, dans la mort culturelle d’un conteur qui s’était retrouvé sans audience et qui souffrait de ne plus parler. Selon les termes de Pilon : « un flot de verbe devait lui torturer le ventre, lui vibrionner la poitrine, guetter ce terrible moment du carnaval où un cyclone lui jaillit de la gorge—dévastateur » (224).

30 L’enquête s’est transformée en quête : « Après s’être demandé avec peu d’éléments : Qui a tué Solibo ?..., il se retrouvait disponible devant l’autre question : ‘Oui, mais qui était Solibo, et pourquoi ‘Magnifique’... ? » (219). Il est très significatif que ces questions soient formulées, non par le narrateur, en opposition avec le policier, mais par le policier lui-même qui accède à de nouvelles interrogations et partage dès lors les conceptions, le point de vue, la position du narrateur lui-même : il entre dans la créolité.

31 La créolité de Pilon consiste sans doute essentiellement à reconnaître l’irrationnel, à se délester des conceptions qui prévalent au pays de Descartes. On voit assez par là que la créolité qui désormais englobe le policier trace une nouvelle limite, cette fois entre l’ici et l’ailleurs, désigné par l’expression « pays de Descartes » qui n’est pas seulement un euphémisme puisqu’elle stigmatise l’opposition culturelle essentielle entre deux logiques, deux discours, le discours antillais (pour reprendre les termes de Glissant) et le discours occidental. La créolité de Bouaffesse et des autres policiers réside davantage dans les traits populaires qui les rapprochent des autres acteurs du drame.

La violence populaire

32 Paradoxalement, si la violence oppose les personnages, c’est par elle qu’ils se rapprochent. Le fait que Bouaffesse soit associé d’emblée à Doudou-Ménar, la marchande, contribue à lui donner la marque de la culture populaire, avec son art du koker. Mais Doudou-Ménar est aussi une femme d’une grande violence. Elle déclenche un scandale au commissariat, elle ne cesse de faire du désordre, des « bankoulélés », elle « vocifère » (49). Devant la « manœuvre policière » qui s’esquisse, elle « sembl[e] prendre un plaisir étrange » : « tout signe de menace, » dit le narrateur, « déclenchait un désir de
Un combat épique s'ensuit, qui rappelle le « marché de Brive-la-Gaillarde » dépeint par Georges Brassens. En effet, à l’apogée de la lutte, « ses seins s’abattent, plus destructeurs que des sacs de graviers. [...] Au verrou de ses aisselles, ses crânes hélent d’angoisse » (52). Doudou-Ménar incarne la femme du peuple, mais également la majorine, c’est-à-dire le double féminin du major, fier à bras, protecteur d’un quartier, à la fois voyou et héros qui représente une haute figure de la culture antillaise. Lorsqu’elle se bat avec Diab-Anba feuille, le narrateur ne montre pas une marchande aux prises avec un policier, mais « le major et la majorine » qui s’affrontent selon les règles d’un combat de regards, de mots, de gestes ritualisés. Le policier n’est plus un policier mais un fier à bras qui se mord la main sauvagement et parle un “créole qu’il ne peut plus réprimer” (94). Ce sont des “manières de gros nègres, pas celles d’un agent de la force publique” s’exclame le chef débordé, “des vagabonnageries”. Mais c’est en vain qu’on rappelle à l’ordre Diab-Anba feuille, c’est-à-dire diable des bois profonds, le plus primitif des diables : il le dit lui-même : « je suis un genre de caca-pourri, tu comprends ça ? Una calamité, si je commence avec toi c’est jusqu’à la mort, je meurs sur toi, dayé pou yonn j’ai déjà envie de mourir, ô Jésus porte le sacrement car je vais mourir sur elle ! sé mô man le mô ! (92) » puis « il porte flap ! le poing à la bouche, se mord hann ! rageusement” et déclare : ‘j’ai saigné pour elle maintenant... et il abat » son boutou sur Doudou-Ménar (93). Peu de pathétique, le narrateur lui-même appelle la victime « la tomate farcie », reprenant à son compte les propos de Bouaffesse. Les témoins, narrateur compris, sont d’ailleurs fascinés par toute cette violence : « Nous-mêmes, notre terreur de témoins se dissipe sous la venue d’une soif de voir (ô nous aimons ces acmés de sangs, cette violence toujours florissante et disponible sans pourquoi ni comment) » (92).

On ne peut s’y tromper, une part de la créolité, du « nous », réside dans ce goût un peu sauvage pour la violence, les échauffourées rabelaisiennes dont Brassens avait su retrouver le souffle et que Chamoiseau continue, trouvant la verve et l’humour, le rythme épique et parodique à la fois de ces mêlées populaires. Dans ces épisodes récurrents, le créole triomphe, sur plusieurs lignes, parfois (Cf. Diab-Anba-feuille, 94). Aussi serait-ce un contresens que d’opposer selon un schéma binaire un petit peuple pacifique à une police néocoloniale déchaînée. En réalité, les personnages se répondent à travers la violence, elle est une des formes de leur créolité, c’est souvent dans son voisinage que fleurit le créole. Elle est violence populaire et truculence, rappelant un Panurge ou un frère Jean des Entommeures. Le roman dépasse les idées morales et idéologiques préconçues pour décrire avec verve un monde fondamentalement désordonné, aussi bien dans sa police que dans son peuple, parce qu’il résiste aux formes cartésiennes de l’ordre et leur préfère les excès du monde carnavalesque. Un Raymond Queneau ne désapprouverait pas cette vision qui n’est pas sans rappeler les scènes finales de Zazie dans le métro. Les policiers ne sont pas de mauvais policiers, ils laissent simplement percer, sous le masque et l’uniforme, leur nature de majors à peine reconvertis, ils s’adonnent, sous couvert de la loi, à leur art préféré, la bataille de rue ou le laghia des Antilles.

**Conclusion**

Le roman de Patrick Chamoiseau est donc tout à fait original en ce qu’il dépasse les clivages convenus dans un monde néocolonial. Il place la contradiction non plus entre les bons et les méchants, entre la police et les coupables ou, par un renversement idéologique, entre la police colonialiste et les victimes, mais à l’intérieur de chaque
personnage. Le narrateur est déchiré entre son appartenance au groupe des djobeurs et son activité d’écrivain qui l’attire vers un autre univers où la parole n’a plus la préséance. Pilon est pris entre deux logiques, entre deux cultures, ses principes contredisant souvent ses actes. Bouaffesse, lui-même est sans doute mu par des réflexes qu’il n’aurait pas, un respect pour la loi et une perversité, une force qui est plutôt celle d’un cow-boy, tandis que ses acolytes se comportent comme des majors et des chefs de bande. Solibo lui-même est à la fois déchu et « Magnifique » comme l’indique son nom : solibo étant en créole synonyme de chute, galipette.

Les personnages se rejoignent dans une mêlée, un carnaval parfois sinistre et souvent drôle, exaltant un désordre qui pour être sanglant n’en est pas moins une forme de résistance à la rationalité occidentale, à l’ordre que prétendrait instaurer une loi et une logique étrangères. La créolité n’est donc pas une idéalisation, un petit monde clos sur lui-même qui exclurait les policiers, les méchants, la violence, la vulgarité. Si Solibo ou Congo représentent un passé plus noble et moral de la créolité où triomphaient des valeurs de solidarité, de sagesse et de résistance, la créolité du présent s’arrange de ce que le manifeste Éloge de la Créolité appellerà « nos tares de néo-colonisés ». Le roman Solibo Magnifique réalise avant la lettre l’un des buts exprimés par le manifeste : « il nous faut nous accepter tels quels ». Plutôt que d’exclure de son projet les policiers, la petite bourgeoisie cultivée, voire l’écrivain, la créolité de Solibo Magnifique leur ouvre le cercle, en laissant s’exprimer les contradictions, les ambiguïtés. Comme tous les mondes vivants, le monde créole est au-delà des jugements de valeur binaires. C’est pourquoi Patrick Chamoiseau a choisi la mangrove, à la fois dangereuse et fertile comme symbole.

La créolité, à travers ce roman qui, il faut le rappeler, précède d’un an le manifeste, se dessine comme une problématique existentielle qui rassemble, non comme un schéma identitaire. « Cela nous évitera aussi, proclame Éloge, un retour à l’ordre totalitaire de l’ancien monde, rigidifié par la tentation de l’Un et du définitif. Au cœur de notre créolité nous maintiendrons la modulation de lois nouvelles, de mélanges illicites » (Bernabé, Confiant, Chamoiseau, 1989, 53). Quoi de plus illicite et de plus transgressif, finalement, que la rencontre de policiers brutaux et d’un petit peuple terrorisé dans la même fascination et le même désordre, la même jouissance ? Les uns et les autres ne sont que les acteurs d’un même carnaval qui célèbre le détournement de tous les pouvoirs et de tous les savoirs.

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RÉSUMÉS

Le roman de Patrick Chamoiseau, Solibo Magnifique, dépasse les clivages postcoloniaux entre un petit peuple opprimé et une police terrifiante. Il nous entraîne dans une « mangrove policière », un milieu hybride et contradictoire, aussi bien d’un point de vue linguistique qu’idéologique. La « créolité » élabore ses symboles dans un récit qui transgresse les limites morales et politiques pour dépeindre une société mosaïque, populaire et vivante.

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Gunner Country: Gar Anthony Haywood’s Fictional World

Claude Julien

1 When participating in the 2001 symposium on African American detective fiction, in Tours, Gar Anthony Haywood declared that his intent as he set out to write the first volume of the Aaron Gunner series¹ had been to bring the geography of Los Angeles to the fore, to create fiction away from the city’s glamorous places by portraying black characters in their own environment.

2 The following study was prompted by the wish to take a closer look at the locale of the series—precisely because the city’s presence is constantly felt in the routes Gunner takes, as well as in the locations of homes and places he goes to in his improbable 1965 red convertible Ford Shelby Cobra.² Locating places, sometimes including street numbers, is a consistent system in the books, not mere make-believe records jotted down in a fictional detective’s notebook. Places and routes bear a meaning for the author, anchor his stories in surroundings he is familiar with—as shown by references to the construction of Freeway 105 that has become convenient in Not Long for This World but used to be a mess of unfinished structures that led nowhere and hampered Gunner’s work ten years earlier (187, 229). Such precision makes for a difficult but rewarding reading for anyone unfamiliar with the city. Difficult because one feels compelled to put the books down to look at a street map; rewarding because an urban maze that tells you next to nothing as you glance at the flat sheet of a street plan takes a human contour on from the books, the weight of social significance.

3 The notion of setting comprises a mix of geographical location, topography, scenery, in-house arrangements such as windows, doors, furniture, upkeep, etc., as well as the beings that people this world. In the heyday of 19th century realism, setting reigned as a device used to delineate characters. What was not problematic in the days when the regional novel stressed the close bond between individuals and places is contested today. Contemporary literary criticism has grown uneasy with the concept of setting—judged as too limited a vantage point liable to hide the wealth and complexity of literary creation behind the mimetic illusion by suggesting too simple a relationship between characters and their milieus. This objection will be upheld here: setting, or space, is not to be
approached as “realistic” (whatever that means in the province of fiction), but as a function in the story it serves by providing a frame that speaks to the reader’s imagination. For instance, Gunner’s messy and unbearably hot duplex apartment and each of the places he goes to in Fear of the Dark resonate like a dead-end world for losers, a world way apart from the more diverse and prosperous locale of All the Living Ones Are Dead published eleven years later.

One can argue for continued interest in settings, if only for the overtones they carry. Location can be the mention of a mere address, or can develop into the sense of a place that lives in the mind. At the beginning of Fear of the Dark, the third person narrator mentions “a cutting wind equal to anything Chicago had to offer” (2). Maybe the reference to the “Windy City” serves as a reminder that Los Angeles’s racial situation is no exception in the country, although it follows its own pattern with mixed communities which Chicago’s racial/ethnic zoning does not offer.

Another reason to take a closer look at Gunner’s Los Angeles is that authorial choice is involved. Indeed, the publication sequence of Gar Haywood’s œuvre supports this assumption. Going Nowhere Fast, that introduces Dottie and Joe Loudermilk trying to get away from their troubleprone family of five, takes Gar Haywood’s fiction on the road after the publication of You Can Die Trying, which can be regarded as a pivotal novel in the Gunner series. It is hoped studying Gunner’s space will help bring that out. Although the detective’s investigations remain based in Los Angeles, his circle broadens as the F.B.I. and wealthier individuals step into his workplace. We will see that these subject matter changes correspond to a discursive shift, as the sardonic embittered tone of voice characteristic of descriptions of the environment in the earliest stories becomes more subdued. The oppressive weather (heat, cold or haze) is replaced by comparative sunshine. Descriptions of ghetto scenery become shorter and are joined by more affluent surroundings.

As we set out to study Gunner’s Los Angeles, first its diversity, then its evolution and, finally, the narrator’s tone of voice, it must be pointed out that reference to Easy Rawlins’s own city will not be sought because it does not invite comparison. Easy’s space constantly reaches out of the ghetto in so far as a greater proportion of white characters are involved that lead the hero’s steps to other places.

The diversity of Gunner Country is almost impossible to fully account for. It varies from novel to novel depending on the topics, the people involved, and their occupations or homes leading Gunner to different areas. The series takes the reader to a high school in Compton; a gang’s hangout; the offices of two law firms (a black one in You Can Die Trying, a white one in It’s Not a Pretty Sight); the headquarters of a black militant organization; police stations (in South-Central and Beverly Hills), as well as the LAPD Homicide Division; the San Bernardino prison, Central Juvenile Hall; shops; motels, mostly seedy but also a luxurious one; a gym; the Hollywood YMCA on Hudson and Selma; a church in Inglewood where a “gangbanger peace summit” (NLTW, 229) takes place; the Tar Pits museum in La Brea; Huntington Beach where wealthier people with artificial suntans consort; shopping malls in sundry locations; a station service; a tire market; a storefront photographer’s studio; Sisterhood House (a home for battered women); and any number of homes and apartments, many derelict ones, a few of them affluent such as a successful black preacher’s residence in Baldwin Hills. Gunner also takes the reader on a brief visit of the campaign headquarters of a far-right politician (in a failed auto parts outlet “stripped to its bare walls” [FD, 101]), a County Court House, the Los Angeles National
Forest (fifty miles north of South-Central), the Inglewood Park Memorial Cemetery; Venice and Torrance; a real estate development in Fontana on route 10, and, to end here a necessarily incomplete enumeration, a gangsta rap recording company’s studio and offices in Burbank.

Recurring places are consistent from book to book, and take more precise contours as the series develops. The Acey Deuce recurs in every novel except You Can Die Trying. Crowded or all but empty depending on the time of day and what is playing on the patrons’ home television sets (FD, 1), dimly lit by beer advertisements on the walls and flickering candles, frequently obscured by billows of floating tobacco smoke, cold in winter and unendurably hot in summer, the bar Lilly Tennell becomes the proud owner of is Gunner’s favorite haunt when his credit is good. The series spans about a decade, but the establishment never undergoes any renovation work. It is described at some length twice, first as Fear of the Dark begins and then, much more thoroughly as It’s Not a Pretty Sight, the fourth novel, opens. Comparing the two passages builds the impression the bar (possibly an image for the ghetto) has actually been deteriorating as its furniture is being depicted for the first time. Its cracked mirrors, rickety chairs and torn red vinyl booths shedding their foam padding are far from inviting, but it feels “like home”, has personality and a loyal following in spite “all of Lilly’s smart-ass, sarcastic grunting,” (NPS, 10). The bar houses a local microcosm, people that socialize or, more rarely, oppose each other. Lilly’s and Gunner’s relationship is special. Although they may be unaware of their bond, the Acey Deuce is a place for mutual friendship (Ibid., 9).

Beyond the sense of continuity under hardship it brings (the Acey Deuce survives with Lilly as an alert business-like owner after her husband’s violent death in Fear of the Dark) the bar also provides a sense of evolving mindsets when Lilly hires Pharaoh Doubleday, a gay employee whom some among her straight customers might disapprove of (WLSA, 107).

Gunner’s ghetto environment is a stable world that looks like an isolated place to which change comes slowly. For instance, the investigator’s operation evolves tardily with a couple of late-coming concessions to modernity when the purchases of a computer and a pager (Ibid., 128, 131) are mentioned—not without some self-derision on Gunner’s part that also serves to spoof racial stereotyping:

It was Little Pete.

"Listen here, Gunner," he said. "When you page somebody, you’re supposed to keep the line clear so they can call you back. Hasn’t anybody ever told you that?"

"Sorry, Pete. I was on-line."

"On-line? You?"

"I’m a man, brother. Not a stegosaurus. Given time, I can adapt."

Little Pete laughed, said. "Go ahead on then, black. What can I do for you?"

(WLSA, 130-131)

Strangely enough, Gunner’s office is only described in more detail (and its appropriateness discussed) in When Last Seen Alive, title number five in the series. Gunner first rents the unoccupied space in the back of Mickey Moore’s barbershop for an office in Not Long for This World (10). We learn the office became even less convenient when it lost its backdoor to the street because that had to be locked and boarded up after five burglaries in two years (NLTW, 209). In short, Gunner’s headquarters is a make-do ghetto-ish place he will not leave in spite of (after his business has risen in more visible social circles) some of his customers’ objections to a lack of confidentiality (ALOD, 24): like the Acey Deuce, the room in the back of Mickey’s shop feels like home. The reader is told in
When Last Seen Alive that, still after seven years, only a beaded curtain separates Mickey’s shop from Gunner’s office; that it is sparsely decorated with William H. Johnson prints (a detail that discloses Gunner’s artistic tastes as well as his desire to assert his racial roots through scenes of everyday rural and urban black life). Light is only provided by floor lamps which means no work has been done to improve the room—an indication of Gunner’s apathy and neglect of self for one who has worked as an electrician for his cousin Del. The passive habit of making do with what one has, of not expecting improvement, is confirmed by the furniture—a second-hand desk, a couch and two chairs—“he has started with remained, looking as listless and forlorn as ever.” (WLSA, 9)

Showing the different facets of South-Central also means showing urban decay and deficient public conveniences. Vandalized pay phones are mentioned (NPS, 8) as well as directories with missing pages (FD, 69). Gunner is mildly indignant of this when it interferes with his immediate need, but, then, he himself has no qualms about tearing out the pages he needs (NPS, 9; FD, 70). The text makes no comment on this. Out-of-order pay phones and useless phone books are just a fact of life. To some extent, Gunner belongs in the community. He is what the environment he lives in has made him.

Los Angeles, “Tinseltown” (FD, 58), is presented right from the start of the series as a place for illusions. Mean Sheila, who has come west from Georgia after serving a prison sentence for killing her pimp, has found an “overcrowded world of has-beens and losers [that] dealt her a devastating blow” (FD, 37). Violence is everywhere, especially in South-Central which is compared to a “shooting gallery” (NLTW, 79). Even parts of Hollywood are eyesores. For instance Townsend’s place Gunner breaks his way into is a “dump”, in an area that is not “the Hollywood of picture postcards.” (FD, 51)

Apart from a few well-kept yards, mostly lawns and sometimes a few bushes rather than flowers, the cityscapes show little vegetal life. Even unkempt spots, more often than not, consist of bare dirt rather than weeds. Vegetation mostly comes out as a wilderness where to hide corpses. In You Can Die Trying, Gunner is knocked unconscious and carried in a car trunk towards the Hollywood Hills where “dense ragweed” will keep the body from sight (172-173). Other than Elysian Park in whose “heavy foliage” Thomas Seldon’s body is dumped (WLSA, 237), hardly any park or public square is mentioned. Nor are there any open air play grounds or sports facilities. Gunner Country is almost tree-less, even the yard around the Digga’s huge Tudor home in Beverly Hills. This world is also deprived of animal life. No birds, not even common sparrows are seen; no insects, flies, bees or butterflies, on flowers. Strangely enough, homes are roach-free; and only once, in Fear of the Dark, are rodents mentioned, not seen or heard, in Buddy Dorris’s place. The Los Angeles National Forest Gunner goes to in When Last Seen Alive is simply represented as “heavily foliated landscape” (237). The itinerary and the narrow winding road up into the forest are detailed, but, apart from a passing car, there seems to be no life in the area. No animals. Not even a bird chirping, flying or hopping around, a wasp humming, a squirrel running about: just rocky terrain and a dangerous ledge Gunner has to negotiate to reach his car keys left for him to pick up on an unknown body’s burial site. Nature too is dead.

The series shows little domestic animal life, apart from the canine species. In It’s Not a Pretty Sight, a stray dog is seen “sniffing a lamppost” (217). In When Last Seen Alive (97), Mickey’s employee, Winnie, presents Gunner with a male Ridgeback puppy that apparently becomes part of the hero’s life, although Gunner is never shown feeding or walking the animal. The puppy is mentioned again, when, at Winnie’s and Mickey’s
urging, Gunner finally names it Dillett after “a Canadian brother [who] makes Arnold Schwarzenegger look like a little girl.” (127) Obviously, Gunner is no dog lover. Reverend Raines, in Not Long for This World, owns two rottweilers that sit threateningly on either side of Gunner’s armchair. One of them, particularly “antisocial” (243) is ultimately euthanized.

Gunner’s human environment is mostly black or (mostly in the police force) white. A few exceptions introduce some ethnic diversity. One Cong Pham, a motel clerk, is a Vietnamese in When Last Seen Alive (29). You Can Die Trying, third in the series, once again stands apart as the most ethnically diverse novel. Danny Kubo, Gunner’s former fellow student at the police academy, is a Japanese-American (74); LAPD officer Deanna Lugo is Hispanic (86) and the Huong couple are nice and friendly Korean shopkeepers whose market is targeted by three black vandals not yet in their teens (125, 213-216). You Can Die Trying alludes to the Rodney King affair (51, 92) without really accounting for the complexity of the city’s racial makeup, as the riots targeted Latino and Korean businesses as much as white ones. Apart from You Can Die Trying, It’s Not a Pretty Sight briefly hints at the war Latinos and blacks have been waging against each other for years in the Oakwood section of Venice (30) —which fails to account for the last decade’s intra-city racial migrations, blacks leaving South-Central to new occupants and moving out towards the hilly parts the whites are deserting. However, one can read in When Last Seen Alive a description of the Silver Lake community which, in Gunner’s view is the epitome of Los Angeles as a “capital of schizophrenia”. One will notice in the quotation below that race, sexual mores and age appear in this order. One should also remark the paired oppositions (suggestive of dichotomies) that make up the area’s portrait and lead up into a massive sentence (that opens with in short) full of alliterations that peak out into a disenchanted statement:

It was Caucasian and Hispanic, gay and straight, young and old. It was picturesque, and it was garish; quaint and charming here, plastic and phony there. It had outdoor cafés and 7-Elevens; health food stores and porn shops; three-story Tudor houses that dated back to 1911, and two-story towers of glass that weren’t yet a year old. In short, Silver Lake was a multilingual, multicultural, architecturally diverse community that offered a little something for everybody. Including the dumb and the dumber. (133)

To a certain extent, the series leads Gunner beyond the ghetto. The first four novels are confined in South-Central Los Angeles. Fear of the Dark is built around a murder organized by a far-right political party to manipulate a black militant group into violence, and takes the reader no further than a derelict area on the outskirts of Hollywood. Not Long for This World revolves around gang violence and a citizen taking vengeance into his own hands. The story moves between two geographical poles: Ted’s Tires, on Main and 137th Street, and Baldwin Hills on the outskirts of the reservoir whose failure caused havoc in 1963. You Can Die Trying mulls over police brutality and attempts to reason on the rioting that had swept the city a year earlier, to understand the fear that provokes the hostility and violence between the police and citizens. As far as places go, the story revolves around the personnel of the Southwest division of the LAPD and ends in a bistro, a traditional afterwork resort for police officers on Figueroa and Flower Streets. It’s Not a Pretty Sight broaches the question of violence against women when Nina, Gunner’s former girlfriend, is shot dead by a ruffian in a case of mistaken identity provoked by a street number that has come unscrewed. Once again, the story crisscrosses South-Central Los Angeles: the
Murder scene is between Main and San Pedro, a side inquest takes Gunner to Oakwood, and Nina’s murderer is ultimately wounded and arrested in Fontana off interstate 15.

Only the latest two titles do take the reader beyond South-Central Los Angeles, if only because the F. B. I. is involved in the cases Gunner investigates. In *When Last Seen Alive*, Gunner investigates two unrelated cases neither of which involves ghetto people as such: a black City Councilman’s adulterous affair, and the disappearance of a former Chicago journalist (who did not regard himself as black [80]) ordered and paid for by D.O.B. (Defenders of the Bloodline), a militant Muslim organization with national ramifications that undertakes the elimination of black people deemed unworthy of the race. This investigation ends when Gunner exposes the murderer: a white housewife from Chicago living in the Silver Lake community. *All the Lucky Ones Are Dead* again has Gunner work two unrelated cases. The first hinges on the East coast/West coast rivalry between gangsta rappers* and takes Gunner among the wealthy in the rap industry and into Beverly Hills. The second brings the D.O.B, terrorists back on the scene through the abduction of a black female conservative radio talk show host, which again brings the F. B. I. in. So, although Gunner never moves far away from downtown Los Angeles, the outside world comes in to disturb and imperil his world. Significantly, the latest two novels take Gunner away from his home city for the first time. Indeed, the prologue of *When Last Seen Alive* shows him attending the 1995 Million Man March in Washington, D. C., and *All the Lucky Ones Are Dead* ends with the investigator booking a flight to Chicago to join Yolanda McCreary, the woman he might be ready to enter into marriage with. Does this sound like the approaching end of a career? Maybe, as a well-established tradition calls for unattached (though sexdriven) private investigators, but that is at best a reader’s guess.

As far as technique is concerned, minimalism is constant from beginning to end. Whatever the importance of a particular character or locale for the plot line, descriptions are brief. Psychological interpretation is abstained from, and descriptions, either of people or places, are limited to salient traits. Terse as they are, notations are to the point and suggest a lot. This can be seen in the short episode when, in *Not Long for This World*, Gunner visits Centennial High School in Compton. On walking into the hall, Gunner asks two students to direct him to the Administration Office. The two girls are briefly accounted for. They are overweight and Gunner appraises them, in his characteristically caustic way, as a man would a woman: were they a few years older, he very much would be attracted to (though minus a few pounds), but definitely not to her companion who is dietetically past help. The two students come to life with a silly adolescent trick that suggests the world is out of joint in this place Gunner has been from the start reluctant to visit because he is impatient of gangbangers and of the reign of indolence, havoc and absurdity to the detriment of education:

They giggled coquettishly upon pointing in opposite directions, then got their act together and charted an accurate course for him to follow, down the corridor to his right, second door on the left. (72)

The girls’ outfits remain unseen, and so do their faces, their complexions, their hairdos, their eyes, their voices. They are just functional sketches (obesity is the plague of poorer people), that also bring out the generation gap through their (here) smiling insolence.

The Boys’ Dean who guides Gunner to a classroom where he is to interview Toby Mills’s gang mates is described in more detail suggesting the myopia, lurking danger and conflict in the educational system:
... a middle-aged, stocky black man with a pointed head and tiny eyes, eyes that worked hard to see past the smoked lenses of thick horn-rimmed glasses. He was a standard issue hard-nosed educator in a white short-sleeved dress shirt, and he greeted Gunner’s visit to Centennial as enthusiastically as a mob boss would that of an IRS auditor. (72)

The school premises are described with the same graphic, but telling economy. Gunner has been taken to a room where the teacher’s mahogany desk and chair are out of place, and whose recent repainting is a valiant but useless effort at hiding the true nature of school life which is underlined by Gunner’s impatience and fear the students he needs to talk to decide to play truant after the lunch break (73):

Room 215 turned out to be a combination English Lit./World History classroom furnished with thirty-four student desks, a teacher’s mahogany desk and chair, and an out-of-round globe of the world with the word fuck emblazoned in red ink across the flatlands of Australia. The olive green chalkboard spanning one wall was similarly decorated, but the walls themselves were spotless and smooth and smelled of fresh paint. (74)

Before we broach the matter of tone, special attention must be paid to the weather. Rotten, and very much present in the first two novels, fair but virtually absent in the latest two, the weather helps signal a marked change of mood. Information on meteorological conditions in the earlier novels helps construct a negative atmosphere. Fear of the Dark is characterized by an unseasonal heat wave, about which one notes nine salient allusions (2, 7, 47, 67—with the added remark that the unusual heat causes concern among the ranks of the police—, 72, 83, 129, 136-137, 172-173). Early on, the heat is associated with strong gusts of wind that seem to blow Townsend (the white killer at first falsely introduced to the reader as a musician eager to perform in a club) into the Acey Deuce. The next novel, Not Long for This World, turns towards the other extremes with wind-driven rain (62, 92), cold (a freezing shadow that makes everything “dingier and more depressing than it really was” (90)), and clouds that hide the sun. Though with fewer allusions (37, 130), You Can Die Trying continues in the same vein, mentioning damp grey mist and, again, the cold. Similarly, It’s Not a Pretty Sight, with only one allusion to the weather, also talks of a chilly mist that prevents the sun from burning its way through (153). In short, the early novels mention unpleasant, even hostile weather quite unlike the stereotype one has of Los Angeles, a location precisely chosen by the cinema industry for its clear skies and abundant light. On the other hand, the later fictions, It’s Not a Pretty Sight and All the Lucky Ones Are Dead, fail to use bad weather to evoke a dreary or oppressive mood—which does not mean the human scene has in any way turned more amiable in the “City of Angels” (NPS, 153).

A changed tone of voice seems to somehow parallel the diminishing allusions to an inauspicious weather. The early novels abound with sardonic remarks or disgruntled aphorisms building a negative image of the city, while such remarks and aphorisms are much less visible in the later volumes.

To illustrate the early manner, one can turn to Not Long for This World and the description of the headquarters of the Los Angeles Peace Patrol, the idealistic group founded by Darrell Lovejoy to eliminate gang violence. As readers first approach the building, they see a cheaply built eyesore from the 1960s, grown rickety and waiting for an earthquake to collapse—a catastrophe mentioned through a discrepant allusion to the Richter scale (very scientific) that clashes with the colloquial phrase describing its inevitable ruin. In spite of the peril, people do hang on there, professionals (a dentist and an
otolaryngologist —in theory upper middle class African Americans) attracted by cheap rents they seldom pay. Lovejoy’s former office itself is a place where nothing makes sense, where a plastic cup with some left over coffee serves for an ash tray:

The official home of the L. A. Peace Patrol was a four-story office building that dated back to the mid-1960s, when architects couldn’t get enough of checkerboard facades of cheap plate glass set in unimaginative rows. Whatever had been holding it together all these years was losing its grip, and what must have looked like an Erector Set construction even when it was new, now looked like a death trap waiting for the next blip on the Richter scale to take a nose dive into the street. (...) When they finally made it inside to view the offices beyond the door, nothing about them suggested that the Peace Patrol was getting anything for their monthly rent they weren’t paying for. The carpet throughout was worn and discolored, the walls were in need of paint and repair, and the panels of the acoustic-tile ceiling overhead were either spotted with old water stains or missing altogether. As if to remain true to the overall morose mood of the place, the receptionist’s desk out front was also an abomination; bearing a Styrofoam cup of cigarette ashes floating in a shallow wash of cold coffee, the tattered blotter pad atop it was tattooed with unintelligible names and phone numbers scribbled three layers deep, while the wastepaper basket on the floor beside it was overflowing with trash. (142-143)

The same mix of factual elements and gallows humor is employed in It’s Not a Pretty Sight, in which the earthquake image recurs (31). Solitary low life white men are also trapped in this world, a dead end for Denny Townsend on a steep street that is “truncated” (a verb carrying overtones of violence and urban zoning) before it reaches into the Hollywood Hills. Though not so very far from Vine Street, it is an utterly derelict place for the poorest among the poor, undocumented immigrants and others that do not officially exist because, as Gunner puts it sardonically, they pay no taxes:

Low-cost, multi-unit dwellings were the rage along this stretch of real estate, packed to and beyond their limit with illegal aliens and others in their general tax bracket. (FD, 51)

The same tone of voice prevails as the paragraph-long description of Ferris’s living quarters, an assemblage (perhaps an image of the city itself) of mismatched odds and ends concludes the passage:

The living-room was right out of a Grandmother’s Surplus catalog: cheap Indian throw rugs and bland-colored draperies, porcelain knickknacks in waist-high showcases and unreadable books killing time on dusty shelves. An old console TV stood at the center ring, squaring off with an oversized sofa as a listless floor lamp played referee. The east wing of the Playboy Mansion, it wasn’t. (Ibid., III)

Causticity is sometimes found where it is least expected as, for instance, when Buddy Dorris’s apartment is described as too small to share with the rodents that lived there (Ibid., 71); or Pokey’s absurdly daring feat (holding up a fast food outlet opposite a police station, as a test to join a gang) concluded by a play upon words stating the LAPD Southw est Division is in fact located on the southeast corner of Martin Luther King and La Salle, as if nothing, not even basics like cardinal points, made any sense. (YCDT, 41)

Frequent as squalor and dereliction are in Gunner’s surroundings, they coexist with more attractive scenes. Indeed, Gunner Country also holds isolated reminders of the past, places of beauty like Sisterhood House in It’s Not a Pretty Sight, homes forsaken by the fortunes that built them (86), now seedy but that still grace the city. Generally speaking, homes are as well-kept as possible, especially where people struggling to assert their middle class status are involved. For instance, in You Can Die Trying, the yards, small but
mostly well-tended, contrast with the alley, an unkempt public space with dented trash cans, rickety fences and missing lamps over garage doors. (87)

Looking at the Gunner series as a developing body of work, one notices that the nature and tone of the descriptions change starting with You Can Die Trying which (when the series was resumed after the two Loudermilk volumes) begins to lead Gunner’s steps towards comparatively more affluent backgrounds. Depictions become more factual and the grim humor described above is somewhat muted down. It is still present as Russell Dartmouth’s place is pictured in It’s Not a Pretty Sight (31), but this is very much an exception in this novel where the faded paint and torn screen of Nina’s house give rise to no squib (17). Solemnity is of course to be expected as Nina’s murder is a personal tragedy for Gunner, a moment stirring regretful memories of a good relationship, of an opportunity he wasted. However, the same matter-of-fact tone prevails as the investigator goes up to Agnes Felker’s apartment, a perfect stranger to him:

She lived in a ramshackle apartment building on the northbound side of Martin Luther King Boulevard, about six blocks west of the Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum. Only a few feet from her door on the second floor, what looked like a homeless man was curled up in a ball on the floor at the end of the hall, sleeping soundly. Or dead. The sheets of old newspaper draped over his body in lieu of a blanket made it hard to tell which. (122)

Similarly, in When Last Seen Alive, Barber Jack’s home (unexpectedly so considering the owner’s life as a single man, also a crazed razor wielder) is neat with a front lawn that makes it look like the home of a grandmother (66), and an appropriately furnished interior where Gunner finds nothing out of the ordinary (67). Fact overtakes sarcasm in the depictions in the later novels. As for instance that of the Keene home, also in When Last Seen Alive: Gunner remarks the perspective on the city to be enjoyed from the heights. He then finds the house quaint and old-fashioned, to be sure, but meets the owner sipping ice tea on a deck patio, “watching sunlight shimmer off the water in the reservoir below” (136): quiet, pleasant circumstances devoid of ironical remarks or, indeed, any social comment on well-to-do people. Similarly, the Carlton Elbridge estate in All the Lucky Ones Are Dead, the kind of place only lavish money can buy, is depicted in a low-key fashion: the ornate stone fountain gracing the front lawn (92) carries no sour grapes of envy on Gunner’s part.

As our brief tour of Gunner Country comes to a close, a few aspects call for highlighting. First, the graphic and suggestive descriptions of the setting are far removed from the ambitions of realism. The space that the series create lives in the mind, just like Gunner knows Los Angeles in his bones, in the tread of his Cobra’s tires. There is no real need for him to look at the road to know where he is. Listening to the “white concrete’s black tar repairs playing a staccato beat against rubber ” (FD, 70) is enough for him and he reflects this betrays the place of South-Central in the hearts of City Hall politicians (FD, 71). Beyond politics, race is, underlined as it is by the pavement’s color dichotomy, the passage’s main point. To one used to the ghetto like Gunner, there is no need to open one’s eyes. One can hear and feel the ghetto sitting on one’s car seat.

Second, the later volumes in the series abandon much of the sardonic gallows humor of the early stories. One could speculate the world view of the series was influenced by, or reacted to, the fictional black private investigators that followed Gunner’s 1988 lead; but events in the city, the extent of the 1992 upsurge against police brutality, may have been more instrumental in the emergence of a more sedate tone of voice: this is suggested by
the fact that *You Can Die Trying* reads like a pivotal fiction which bravely, if not always gravely, discusses the vicious circle of racial hate and fear in the exchanges between Gunner and (white) Sergeant Kupchack (35-37, 43-53, 206-210). Nothing comes out of Gunner’s good will towards the force, only the policemen’s laughter when he leaves the café. However, the book ends on Gunner’s promise to himself he is not going to give up reforming young Gaylon Brown: a self-assigned task he follows through in *It’s Not a Pretty Sight* when he gruffly teaches the youth respect for women.

Third, beyond the tonal changes we have outlined, the series reflects a (hopelessly) disjunctive world in so far as the cases Gunner investigates reveal (through the senseless violence exemplified by characters like Pearsons and Dartmouth in *It’s Not a Pretty Sight* or Brother Jack in *When Last Seen Alive*) a world trapped in absurdity and violence —whether one looks at racial relationships or rapport within the black community. Absurdity and violence in black and white open the series with the Brothers of Volition’s naïve vengefulness that turns them into unsuspecting instruments in the hands of bigoted white politicians, and ultimately into kamikaze bombers. Black-on-black absurdity and violence hover over the latest title in the series with a “tough” gangsta rapper he-man (in fact a sensitive young man in private) committing suicide after a visit of his petulant wife he has just cheated upon. This marital strife, however, is topped by a murderous scheme the Digga’s suicide made useless: Teepee (the right-hand man of his rival from the east coast, 2DaddyLarge) had conceived the plan to eliminate the Digga by infecting him with AIDS and advertising his cheating with prostitutes to his wife... Three deaths result from this crooked trick elaborated in a sick mind that takes rap fiction for reality.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Works Cited

The Gunner series:


The Loudermilk volumes:

NOTES

1. The following abbreviations have been used for textual references: FD for Fear of the Dark, NLTW for Not Long for This World, YCDT for You Can Die Trying, NPS for It’s Not a Pretty Sight, WLSA for When Last Seen Alive, and ALOD for All the Lucky Ones Are Dead. All the references between brackets below are to the editions specified in the works cited section.

2. This car is much too visible for a private investigator. Gunner’s often mentioned attachment to his vehicle can be interpreted as an oblique comment on American society. Bequeathed to him in Vietnam by “some reckless red-neck kid fresh from the sands of Myrtle Beach, South Carolina,” the car is a legacy from absurdity, sour memories of his tour of duty (FD, 16,49-50).

3. Ernest Gaines’s fiction, rooted in a recreated real place in Louisiana — along the False River between Oscar and New Roads (St. Adrienne and Bayonne on the St. Charles River in fiction), is a case in point. A metaphor imposes itself that turns this forsaken rural area into an ideal place for fiction, a battleground overshadowed by the past where blacks are seeking to build a place for themselves. This “false” river is not as static as it looks. The river gone to run elsewhere still feeds the stretch of water, inequality still haunts the locale when the pleasure boating richer whites disturb the fishing that means subsistence for local blacks. One may be tempted to read more into this setting. The mighty Mississippi that no longer runs there may be apprehended as the representation of a society that has left black people in the lurch. While no explicit textual statement supports this, the reader can draw the inference.

4. As the novel’s title suggests, there is no way mutual hate and defiance between ghetto people and the police can be overcome. Even without inside information on the writing time frame, the shift from Gunner’s Los Angeles to the Loudermilks’ Airstream trailer (and back to Los Angeles two volumes later) suggests that after the very topical You Can Die Trying, the author may have felt a need to take his stories to other places.

5. The same applies to characters. We for instance learn Gunner was “booted from the Police Academy” in Fear of the Dark (16) and only learn the reasons for his dismissal (punching a racist instructor in defense of Kubo, a Japanese American fellow-student) in You Can Die Trying (74).

6. The bar’s name may carry symbolical significance: it is inspired from a backgammon variation in which a throw of a one and a two has special value, which takes both Gunner’s work as a private investigator and the lives he interacts with into the realm of games of chance.

7. A long overdue acquisition for a hero relying on information for his work — especially one created by a former computer technician. There may be another aspect: the implied idea that the ghetto is a backwater and that it takes technology a long time to reach into it.

8. He was looking for an address on his computer. His having only one phone socket available shows the limits of Gunner’s modernity.

9. The ghetto’s ability to suck an individual into deviant behavior is best illustrated by Aired, Gunner’s nephew, a successful drug dealer in It’s Not a Pretty Sight turned investor in the gangsta rap recording industry in All the Lucky Ones Are Dead — while remaining in touch with the underworld.

10. “Gangsta rap” first came out on the west coast. Digga Jones, whose death Gunner investigates is no OG (original gangster), but a well-meaning young man who cheats on his wife. That Haywood’s novels are steeped in contemporary life is a case in point here. This story takes its cue from the deaths of Tupac (west coast) and Notorious Big (east coast) that occurred six months apart in 1997 and were heavily reported in the media. Even the fictitious name 2DaddyLarge conjured up the real-life rapper’s name “Notorious Big”. Bume, who operates his record company from jail in the novel may impersonate real life entrepreneur Suge Knight.
11. Here are two more contemporary instances: George P. Pelecanos’s Strange is unwilling to commit himself to marriage in Right as Rain (2001), but tries to steer Janine’s son into proper behavior. Valerie Wilson Wesley’s Tamara Hayle is a divorced and dedicated mother of one.

12. There exists a school bearing such a name. Opening the school’s internet site reveals, among other information, that teachers with full credentials represent 63% of the staff as compared to 88% statewide (Sep. 2003 data.)

13. The following brief quotation will illustrate this point: “Had he been flat broke, rather than merely reluctant to live on his savings until his next gig, things might have been different. But he wasn’t. For a few weeks, at least, he was solid. So he put Wally Browne behind him, pushed his bubbling red Cobra north to South-Central along the California sun-soaked 405, and kissed Browne’s retainer check good-bye, with only a modicum of lingering regret.” (ALOD, 11)

14. One must note, however, that home ownership never is brought up by the narrator or by the characters — except Lilly Tennell when she mentions a rundown market her husband, J. T., “God bless the fool,” she says, had unwisely bought (FD, 156).

ABSTRACTS

Le roman de Patrick Chamoiseau, Solibo Magnifique, dépasse les clivages postcoloniaux entre un petit peuple opprimé et une police terrifiante. Il nous entraîne dans une « mangrove policière », un milieu hybride et contradictoire, aussi bien d’un point de vue linguistique qu’idéologique. La « créolité » élabora ses symboles dans un récit qui transgresse les limites morales et politiques pour dépeindre une société mosaïque, populaire et vivante.

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III. Women writers — women's sleuths
Valerie Wesley’s Tamara Hayle and Newark’s Past, Present, and Future

John C. Gruesser

1 Even more than Sam Spade and San Francisco, Spenser and Boston, and V. I. Warshawski and Chicago, Tamara Hayle and Newark are inextricably linked. Born in the often maligned city and raised in the projects, Valerie Wilson Wesley’s savvy black private eye and fiercely protective single mother declares, “I’m a Newark girl at heart, always will be” (WES 15). In addition to describing various locations in New Jersey’s largest municipality, the seven novels of the series provide readers with historical information about a city that has been losing industries and jobs since the 1930s and population since the 1950s. In her distinctive and often sassy voice, Tamara repeatedly stresses the profoundly devastating effects of the 1967 race riots — “the flames of [which] had charred the city’s soul as hard as burnt wood” (DGGH 4). Because both Tamara and Newark are survivors that are often overlooked and underestimated by the white male power structure, it is tempting and by no means inappropriate to view the protagonist as a symbol for the city. However, the nature of the relationship between Tamara and her turf is actually somewhat more complicated than this. The three generations of the Hayle family (Tamara’s parents, Tamara and her siblings, and Tamara’s son Jamal) represent the city’s past, present, and future; Newark serves as the repository for her memories and values; and specific locations in the city and the surrounding area at times represent the past and present lives of characters in the novels.

2 Thoughts of her deceased parents, an occasionally absent and alcoholic father and a bitter and at times abusive mother continue to haunt the heroine. Tamara’s parents reflect the difficult times faced by the people of Newark in general and African Americans in particular in the years following the Second World War, as well as their long-range consequences. Tamara and her older brother symbolize Newark’s more immediate past and present circumstances. Johnny was a good man whose suicide remains the most disturbing event in Tamara’s life. His death represents not only the staggering loss of black male life in Newark during the tough years since the riots but also the unrealized potential contained in that life. Tamara, on the other hand, like the city itself, has possessed the strength to carry on, remembering and attempting to make sense of the
past, successfully negotiating the often daunting challenges of the present, and creating
and nurturing the future. Although he has experienced police brutality firsthand and
endured the violent deaths of his half brothers, Jamal has managed through Tamara’s
vigilance, love, and instruction to develop into a bright, sensitive, and happy young man
with a legitimate opportunity for success ahead of him. One of that most endangered of
species, a young black male in a violent city environment, Jamal stands for Newark’s
future—a future which, after decades of decline and gloomy predictions, finally seems to
be on the upswing.

3 Tamara lives in her parents’ East Orange house “a cough and a wink from Newark” (NHP
39), explaining, “My roots run deep. I could never live far from Newark where they were
planted, and my history and those I’ve lost cling to me no matter where I am-shadowing
my dreams and walking in my present” (TDR 158). In the first novel in the series, When
Death Comes Stealing, Tamara offers a brief synopsis of the history of her hometown:
“Newark is a survivor city—an old fighter who won’t go down for the count. Johnny used
to talk about how Broad Street stretched out—grand movie theaters, department stores,
big-time musicians playing Newark first, and you couldn’t make it down the streets on a
Saturday night. But everything changed after the’ 67 riots” (WDCS 15). In fact, Newark
had been in decline since before the Second World War with affluent white residents
fleeing to the suburbs, a shrinking tax base, a high crime rate, inadequate health care,
and thousands of African Americans arriving from the South only to find insufficient,
substandard, and over-priced housing, the worst of any major city in the country
(Cunningham [1966] 299, 301; Hayden 5). Following the war, more public housing units
were built in Newark than in any other city in the United States; however, routine
maintenance did not take place even though money had been allotted for this purpose
(Stummer 16). Initially all but denied access to these housing projects, black people later
came to dominate these poorly maintained buildings as white people left the city in
greater numbers. The city lost nearly 34,000 residents between 1950 and 1960, but in this
decade the white population declined by an astounding 100,000. Whereas Newark’s
population was over nine-tenths white at the start of World War II, by 1965 it was
estimated that half of the city’s residents were black (Stummer 8; Cunningham [1966]
312-14). From 1950 to 1970 manufacturing jobs in Newark declined by nearly sixty
thousand, and by January 1967 the unemployment rate among African Americans had
risen to fifteen percent (Stummer 10; Hayden 5).

4 Nevertheless, the riots indeed represent a watershed in the history of the city. Sparked by
reports of a black cab driver being beaten by white policemen, rioting was inevitable
because of the terrible conditions under which many of the city’s blacks lived and two
actions recently taken by Mayor Hugh Addonizio, namely the appointment of a white
political crony to the school board instead of a more qualified black candidate and the
decision to displace thousands of downtown African American residents to build the
University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey. The riots began on Wednesday July
12th, less than two months after Newark celebrated its 300-year anniversary, and ended
on Monday July 17th, 1967, a year in which 125 American cities experienced rioting.
Although there was widespread looting of white-owned stores and unconfirmed reports
of sniper fire, investigators would place the blame for the deaths, injuries, and
destruction of black businesses on the 5367 fearful, heavily armed, trigger happy, almost
exclusively white National Guardsmen and the 600 white state troopers called in on the
morning of Friday July 14th to assist the 1400 Newark police officers, eighty percent of
whom were white in a city with a majority black population (Cunningham [1988] 324; Stummer 18; Hayden 37, 45). New Jersey Guardsmen and State Police fired nearly 15,000 rounds of ammunition during their three days of occupation, causing one historian to remark, “Seldom has so much gunfire been directed at so few verifiable enemies” (Cunningham [1988] 322). Twenty-six people died, twenty-three by gunfire, over 1500 were wounded, more than 1600 were arrested, and in excess of 1000 stores and businesses were destroyed with property damage estimated at approximately ten million dollars (Cunningham [1988] 324-25). Only the riots in Los Angeles in 1965 (with 34) and Detroit in 1967 (with 40), cities with many more black residents than Newark, had higher death tolls (Wright 72). Shops and businesses closed, the corrupt mayor was indicted and lost the election in 1970 to Kenneth Gibson, an African American who would serve four terms as mayor until 1986 when he was defeated by Sharpe James, who has run the city ever since. Those who could afford to do so, including middle class blacks, left Newark. Over forty thousand would flee the city between 1970 and 1975 (Stummer 19), and overall from 1950 to 2000 the population of Newark fell from 438,776 to 273,546 people (Guide2Newark.com).

5 Six of the seven Tamara Hayle novels take place in New Jersey: five in and around Newark and The Devil Riding (2000), in Atlantic City. Moreover, even though the third book in the series is set in Jamaica, by implication it reveals a great deal about the main character’s relationship to her hometown.

6 When Death Comes Stealing (1994) introduces readers to Tamara, her family history, her relationship to her son, her detective business, and her milieu. Born in 1957, Tamara grew up in the Hayes Homes and witnessed the Newark riots, which began at the Fourth Police Precinct, right across the street. She vividly recalls the acrid smell of tear gas and the frequent sounds of gunfire. During the riots, Hayes Homes resident Eloise Spellman, a forty-one year-old mother of eleven, was killed by police fire when she peeked through the window of her tenth-floor apartment on the evening of Saturday July 15th (Cunningham [1988] 321; Hayden 83). The Hayle family moves to “a tiny two bedroom yellow and green cape” (WDCS 59) on Chestnut Terrace, a street off of South Orange Avenue in East Orange, in 1968. Her grandfather and grandmother, who had been a carpenter and a baker down South, moved to Newark during the Great Migration. In her dealings with various people, Tamara often recalls the folk wisdom of the latter, who raised her more than her mother had done. Her alcoholic father worked in paint factory in Down Neck Newark; her abusive mother was a domestic worker. Her brother Johnny, a respected Newark cop prone to depression, killed himself in 1977 (WDCS 123) for reasons that are either unknown to Tamara or she is unwilling to share.

7 Her brother’s death changes her life (Tamara is the one who finds his body), causing her to marry De Wayne Curtis when she is only twenty-one (WDCS 7). At about twenty-two, she has a son, Jamal, with Curtis whom she later divorces. In part because of Johnny, she decides to become a cop in 1983, serving as the only black and sole female police officer in Belvington Heights, “a mostly white suburb north of Newark” (WDCS 105). When some of her fellow police officers harass Jamal, beat up his babysitter, and joke about doing so, unaware that her son was involved, she quits the department after five years: “Jamal had been nine when it happened—the reason I left the force, his initiation into black manhood” (WDCS 111). Her boss, Chief Roscoe L. DeLorca, is upset by her decision; however, they continue to respect each other, and her work sometimes brings them together. Except for a married older sister named Pet, she has no other family—it’s just
herself and Jamal she asserts—and it is her fiercely protective maternal instincts that make her a unique detective. Tamara opens up her own private investigation business, Hayle Investigative Services, Incorporated in 1988, and three years later moves her business into an office “on the corner of Main Street and South Harrison in the city of East Orange” (WDCS 60) in a building owned by her friend Annie. She shares a mailbox with Wyvetta Green, who runs a salon called Jan’s Beauty Biscuit, which often proves a good place to learn about people in the community. Tamara does not make much money, with outstanding bills and a small client base, and she drives a decrepit 1982 Diesel Jetta, nicknamed the Blue Demon, until it is destroyed by thugs in the late 1990s. Although her profession often places her in harm’s way and this comes to concern her son, she loves her job and the freedom it affords her. Like Dashiell Hammett’s Spade and Raymond Chandler’s Philip Marlowe, she has her own code of ethics, knows that she is good at her job, and believes it is the only profession she could ever find fulfilling. In 1993 when Tamara is thirty-six and Jamal fourteen, she is hired by DeWayne to investigate the seemingly accidental death of one of his sons. As more of DeWayne’s sons die, it becomes clear that there is a serial killer at work. Eventually Tamara must travel to her ex-husband’s childhood home in Virginia to find the information that enables her to solve the murders, although her final confrontation with the killer, in which she saves Jamal, occurs back in New Jersey.

Even though much of the action of Devil’s Gonna Get Him (1995) occurs in Belvington Heights, this is very much a book about Newark past and present. At a party thrown by fabulously wealthy investment banker Lincoln Storey at Jackson Tate’s restaurant, recently relocated to Belvington Heights, Storey dies of an allergic reaction to peanut butter deliberately mixed into the bean dip. When the police charge Tasha Green, who worked as the caterer at the party and who had been sleeping with Storey, with murder, Tamara is hired by Tasha’s sister Wyvetta to find the real killer. Storey’s second wife and stepdaughter, Alexa, hate him, the former marrying him for his money and then taking drastic measures when he threatens to deprive her of her opulent lifestyle, which includes a mansion in the Heights. The closing of Tate’s restaurant on West Market St. in Newark upsets many residents of his hometown. He not only has sold his soul for his fancy new restaurant but later resorts to desperate actions when Storey threatens to sell his restaurant and expose unflattering information about him and his son. The novel suggests that the two murder victims, first Storey and later Tate, both raised in Newark, do not belong in Belvington Heights. Tamara’s revelation at the end of the novel that “Alexa Storey deeded Tate’s restaurant to Tasha, who promptly moved it back to Newark and renamed it Tasha’s after she had her son” (DGGH 274) has considerable significance, indicating that the two Newark-born dead men who made good but lost their way have in some sense returned to their hometown—Tate through the restaurant, and Storey through the son that Tasha has borne.

Wesley’s Jamaican novel, Where Evil Sleeps (1996) concerns impulses, instincts, and inner voices. Against her better judgment, Tamara agrees to accompany Lilah Love to a dangerous Kingston bar, only to wind up with a dead man’s blood on her dress and no money or identification. Later she uncharacteristically allows greed to coax her into helping Lilah look for a considerable sum of money she knows is dirty, thereby further involving herself in a spiral of destruction and death. Even though Jamal’s impending college expenses are her motive, she knows what she’s doing is wrong and frequently recalls her grandmother’s warnings about ill-gotten gains. Eventually she eradicates the
personification of evil in the book, but does not find peace. Away from the Newark area, she goes native, losing sight of who she is, what’s wrong and right, but when she returns home she is back on track. As she explains at the book’s conclusion, “you don’t see men die and expect to live your next few months unscathed. It changes you in ways you can’t imagine, and I guess my leaving that money alone was one of them. Despite my moral stance, I was still depressed. I’d killed a man [...], putting evil in its place, but I was haunted by all that had happened” (207). The fact that Tamara refuses to touch the Cayman Island account worth more than $30,000 that she acquires from her Jamaican vacation, not even mentioning it in subsequent books as she struggles to get by and worries about raising her son’s college tuition, indicates that her moral compass has been righted.

In another Newark novel, *No Hiding Place* (1997), Bessie Raymond hires Tamara to find the killer of her son Shawn, who had been Johnny’s little brother in a Newark police program called Project TC two decades earlier. Although Tamara does not recognize Bessie, she notices a resemblance between her and a teenaged boy, Shawn’s son Rayshawn, who tried to hold her up with a .38 around midnight near her office. Tamara suspects retired hero policeman Gus Lennox, father of Gina, whom Shawn had impregnated and abused, but he has a seemingly ironclad alibi. With help from a six yearold girl and her friend Annie, Tamara is able to figure out who killed Shawn and unravels the cycle of betrayal and death that binds the Raymond and Lennox families. However, she continues to blame herself for not going to the police about Rayshawn’s attempted mugging of her, though she has serious reservations about the police and their treatment of black youths. When it comes to the police in Newark, the novel asserts that it’s no longer strictly a white-black thing, as it was for so many years. Rather, it’s a good cop-bad cop dichotomy, her brother Johnny representing the former and Gus Lennox the latter. In the Epilogue, Tamara contends, “Johnny’s debt” to the Raymond family incurred by committing suicide and thereby abandoning Shawn “would finally be paid” by her solution of his murder (NHP 206).

In the Newark novel *Easier to Kill* (1998), the city’s checkered past exerts a powerful influence despite the improvements that have recently been made. A popular radio personality named Mandy Magic hires Tamara when she receives a disturbing note following the death of one of her employees. Early in the book, Tamara drives to the projects where she and Magic grew up and contemplates their legacy:

> They were abandoned now and stood like ugly monuments to somebody’s dream that you could pile families like egg crates on top of one another and nothing would end up broken. [...] Many families had survived and thrived, and they had left, their spirits and wills stronger for the experience. I was stronger for it—I knew that now. [...] I wondered which of Mandy Magic’s secrets these dark walls still kept (27-28).

When two more employees are killed in less than a week, Tamara knows that someone or something from Magic’s past has come back to torment and will eventually kill her. Characteristic of her use of the city throughout the novels, Wesley depicts a decrepit part of Newark that symbolizes the dark secret lurking behind Magic’s success. When her investigation takes her to this dangerous location, Tamara pauses:

> There was a dreariness to it, a deadness that made me fearful of what I would find. [...] I hesitated for a moment wondering if maybe I should turn around and head back to the parts of the city that I knew: downtown with its sparkling new arts center and newly awakened hope. The Ironbound, with its restaurants sweet with the smells of lobster and saffron rice. The Central Ward fish-fry joints and incense-
Although Magic fires Tamara from the case when she pushes the talk show host to be more forthcoming about her past, acting on a sudden insight, she returns to Magic’s home and helps to prevent the killer from murdering anyone else. Ultimately, the novel suggests that people must accept who they are, where they come from, and what they have done. Unlike Magic, who tries unsuccessfully to evade her own history, Tamara says “a silent prayer of thanks for the life I did have. That I didn’t feel like I had to lie about everything in my past or, for the most part, my present” (102).

In Wesley’s most recent novel, Dying in the Dark (2004), the brutal murder of her best friend from high school causes the protagonist to reflect on the changes that she and her hometown have undergone, as well as on those that may lie ahead. After decades of decline, there is a new attitude in Newark: “In the last few years, many good things have happened. [...] NJPAC, the arts center that they built a couple years ago, has changed the mood here forever. Property values are rising, carjacking is down, and there’s pride in people’s voices when they say where they live” (DITD 31). At times, Tamara regards the city’s reinvigorated present and potentially even brighter future as a return to its more prosperous days before the riots. Driving through an affluent section of the city, she recalls the Newark of her youth: “I was proud of how beautifully the neighborhood had been preserved and pleased to claim it for my city. It was like those streets I remembered driving down with my father when I was a kid. [...] Weequahic [Park], Chancellor Avenue, Lyons Avenue. I could still hear the names of those grand places rolling off my father’s lips. Someday they would be back to what they were; I hoped I’d be around to see it” (DITD 109-10). Yet, like Tamara and other characters in the novel who are haunted by the past, Newark cannot easily escape its history. Citing a real-life case of child abuse and malnutrition in a local foster home that made front-page headlines in the New York and New Jersey newspapers, Tamara observes, “However, there are ominous signs here, too. A few months back, a child’s battered body was found in a closet of a filthy basement. His two little brothers, also starved and beaten, had been left for dead. It was a kick in the face of the city, and everybody felt the city’s shame. [...] A death like that leaves its mark on a city like mine; it’s a reminder that we have a long way to go” (31). Although her investigation forces Tamara to confront and make peace with her past, thoughts of the future, nearly always connected to Jamal, are never far away. She repeatedly refers to his imminent departure for college, which she knows will significantly alter her life. After solving the murders of Celia and several others, she credits the killer with teaching her that “If you hold too tightly to your past, you’ll destroy your future” (DITD 221), a lesson that has relevance for Tamara vis-à-vis her son and for the city of Newark.

Neither Tamara, nor her creator, attempts to avoid the often unsettling history of Newark. Valerie Wesley effectively weaves the story of the city and Tamara’s family history into the plots of her mysteries. Smaller and less glamorous than Los Angeles, Chicago, or New York, Newark witnessed much during the twentieth century—the Great Migration, urban decay, white flight, the 1967 riots, the difficult years of struggle that followed, and the current inklings of a somewhat brighter future. Like Tamara, the city’s history is what it is, revealing many things about the legacy of race relations and the current state of inner-city life in the United States.
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Works Cited


NOTES

1. This paper, which has been updated to include the latest novel in the Tamara Hayle series, was originally delivered during the Winchester (UK) 2003 CAAR conference. A different version appears in F. Gysin & C. S. Hamilton, eds.: Complexions of Race. The African Atlantic. Hamburg: Lit Verlag, 2005, pp. 207-226.

2. The following abbreviations have been used for referencing purposes: WES for Where Evil Sleeps, DGHH for Devil’s Gonna Get Him, NHP for No Hiding Place, TDR for The Devil Riding, WDCS for When Death Comes Stealing, ETK for Easier to Kill, DITD for Dying in the Dark.
ABSTRACTS

The turbulent history of Newark, New Jersey plays a prominent role in the seven novels of Valerie Wilson Wesley’s Tamara Hayle series. Three generations of the detective’s family represent the city’s past, present, and future; her hometown serves as the repository for her own memories and values; and specific locations in and around Newark symbolize the past and present lives of several characters.

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How Are You Doing with Your Pain?

Violence in Black Women’s Crime Fiction

Nicole Decure

“God. Negroes and their pain. What the tuck were we going to do if suddenly it all did go away? Would we even know who we were any more?”
Charlotte Carter, Coq au Vin, 37.

1 In crime fiction, I am not interested so much in the crime as in the fiction. I do not read mystery novels to solve the crime before the writer. For me, crime fiction is a form of escape fiction, totally unrealistic with its invincible heroine (or hero) and, at the same time, totally realistic in its portrait of contemporary society and its reflection on social issues. These are, to me, the indispensable ingredients of a good novel.

2 A few years ago, I concluded an article on black women’s crime fiction by wondering who killed whom, realizing that crime rarely crossed the barrier of race in those books. But that was not the main concern of the article then. Now, the numbers of black women crime writers have grown and there are a substantial number of books to explore. At the last count, as of March 2001, over 20 authors had published about 60 books, excluding juvenile fiction. I shall be looking at the work of 18 women writers.

3 When we examine the question of crime in black women’s crime fiction, we have to consider, more broadly speaking, the question of violence. Not all violence results in killing, far from it. But, if murder is the ultimate violence, other forms of violence can be extremely damaging and hurtful, maiming people for the rest of their lives. If we take for granted the fact that women’s crime fiction reflects, to a large degree, through the main heroine, the beliefs and values of its author, then the exploration of violence by black women is particularly interesting because they experience this violence and write about it from, at least, a double perspective: as targets of male violence (a universal women’s experience) and as targets of racial and racist violence, both historically and today in urban communities.
This racial dimension is what distinguishes black women’s fiction from white women’s fiction from which it is, if not totally absent, at least rare, and seen from the outside, not the inside. It is what gives black women’s crime fiction its particular voice (or rather voices). And what differentiates black women’s fiction from black men’s fiction is the gender dimension which is, most of the time, a truly “sexual” dimension in the sense of “sexual activity” which is itself, too often, a euphemism for rape and abuse. The way the two oppressions, sexual and racial, are so often intertwined and inseparable makes the peculiar flavor and richness of this fiction.

**Murder: reality and fiction**

Since we are talking about crime fiction, let us start by examining the place of murder in black women’s fiction.

First, and that might be a distinguishing trait in black women’s fiction (and men’s too), a lot of killing takes place. In some books the body count is extremely high; 7 or 8 corpses is not uncommon. This is as far as one can get from the one body in the library or in the gazebo which, once upon a time, engaged all the attention of the idle amateur detective.

The statistics are brutal. The figures provided by the U. S. Department of Justice (1999)\(^3\) tell us that a black person is six times more likely to get killed and seven times more likely to commit homicide than a white person. Furthermore, in a sort of sick form of discrimination, these homicides are mostly intra-racial: 94% of blacks are killed by blacks and 86% of whites are killed by whites. Still, inter-racial killing is not as rare (26%) as inter-racial marriage (3%).

There seems to be an escalation in this form of self-inflicted genocide. In Judith Smith-Levin’s *Do not Go Gently*, a woman reflects on this:

> If our men are not in jail, or into drugs, then they’re out there using each other for target practice. I don’t know what’s wrong with us. We don’t have to worry about the Skinheads and the Klan, we’re doing their job for them! (100)

Women kill far more in fiction than in reality. More than a third of all the murders are committed by women in fiction whereas, in real life, they commit only 12.5% of the murders. Men are 9 times more likely to kill than women but only 3 times more likely to be killed. They kill more men than women which is understandably the same in fiction, although the proportions are different. Finally, white women kill more than black women in fiction whereas in real life the opposite is true.

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Multiple murders are rare in real life. They abound in fiction: a killer kills several persons (not at the same time). The chain of murders reflects a fatal chain of events: one murder leads to another, then to another and so on, as murderers usually try to escape discovery and retribution.
Still, the problem is not really whether statistics reflect reality but rather what the writers are telling us through portraits of these wasted lives. Murder is the element around which, with few exceptions, the whole plot revolves so it has to mean something other than the cleverness of the detective in solving an intellectual puzzle.

The most prevalent cause of crime is, unsurprisingly, money—often linked to drugs. This is the case for example in Charlotte Carter’s *Rhode Island Red*, where everybody wants to get hold of a mythical saxophone (hence worth a fortune) full of coke given to Charlie Parker as a bribe to play at a wedding. It is also the drugs/money association that is at the basis of the murders in Margaret Cuthbert’s *The Silent Cradle*. A doctor kills through a junkie who needs money for his daily doses.

Some crimes are clearly racist. In Eleanor Bland’s *Tell no Tales*, a white policeman kills his black pregnant girlfriend and convinces a black man to take the rap. In Judith Smith-Levin’s *Do not Go Gently*, a white man rapes black women and it is the “black” part of the woman he is after. Elaborate biographical explanations are given but in her commendable desire to deal with the complexity of relationships between the races and sexes, the author gets her signals mixed more than once and the blame too often falls on the victims. But if the narrative fails to convince, it works at the symbolic level: because two men attack the same women, although for different reasons, the hatred against women and blacks is seen as generic, not just the idiosyncrasy of a disturbed individual. What works really well is that we get into the mind of the rapist and see how the hatred works. It is lieutenant Starletta Duvall’s involvement in the case as a black woman that really saves the plot. Her sense of being personally threatened through these women gives her a desire for revenge:

> Black women are being slaughtered. If I don’t find out what’s going on and who’s behind it, another one of my sisters is going to die simply because of the color of her skin [...] How many have to die because we happen to be black? (158)

Whites in general, men and women alike, are evil in Judith Smith-Levin’s novels, be they rich white teenagers in *Green Money*, a white man (a sadistic rapist), in *Do not Go Gently* or a white woman in *The Hoodoo Man*. To offset this, there is Star’s perfect white lover, Mitchell and her partner (but Italian does not count as white!) The crimes committed by Blacks are more readily excused, at the personal level at least, if not at the societal level.

An interesting variation on the “racism” motive, although far-fetched especially after all the red herrings and the terrible confusion about who kills whom, is found in Charlotte Carter’s *Coq au Vin* in which remorse at betraying black people is expressed. The murderer is ashamed of what he has done, stealing black country people’s music to make money for himself:

> I remember how he talked about the blessedness of black people from the country. Grace was the word he used. When he hatched that scheme, it was like he was stealing the grace from his people and renouncing his own blessedness. He must have been so profoundly ashamed of what he’d done that he had to kill everyone who knew about it. He wasn’t just killing people, he was killing his shame. (191)

In *Somebody Else’s Child*, Terry McMahan Grimes could have developed the racist motive for murders committed by a white woman who wants to protect her son’s political career and kills black people who might know about her late husband’s past as an abortionist, and the father of a black child who let his girlfriend die: black lives are not worth much and can be dispensed with. But it is just the mother-hen syndrome that emerges here.
Hiding one’s color is a recurrent motive to kill. Pauline Hopkins used this ploy, not so much as a motive for crime but as a source of pain and disruption both in “Talma Gordon” and in Hagar’s Daughter at the beginning of the 20th century. Recently, in A Darker Shade of Crimson, Pamela Thomas-Graham has used it really as motive for murder by a Harvard president hiding his colour. Grace F. Edwards has a mother killing her daughter (and others) to hide her “colour” in A Toast before Dying.

Sexist crimes are often inseparable from racist ones as we have seen above. Which part is woman hatred and which part racial hatred is difficult to determine.

Penny Mickelbury examines crimes against women, which she considers a “fundamental issue” in Night Songs (26). She deplores that they are not recognized as hate crimes. Gianna Maglione, the white lieutenant, accuses her boss of ignoring this reality whereas if all the victims had been black it would be considered a hate crime (25). The problem is that, at the end, Mimi Patterson, the black journalist, realizes that the 10 women killed were black (210) and the crime against gender turns into a crime against race. How could this have escaped her or Gianna? This is last-minute thinking without rereading the whole novel. After the resolution, the race factor does not really add anything as it is too late to weave it into the investigation and it just gets a short statement about “the pain of knowing that there were people who believed her life had no value because of her race” (210). In fact, these are both racist and sexist crimes, it is black women who are killed.

Homophobia is the motive behind the murders in Penny Mickelbury’s second novel, Keeping Secrets as, according to the narrator, “Being queer in America [...] was one of the few things worse than being Black. It was possible to be forgiven the color of one’s skin, the assumption being that one had no choice in the matter. But to love one’s same sex— that was something else.” (47)

Homophobia is trans-gender and trans-race. At one point, black journalist Mimi Patterson realizes that there is an order to the killings: white man, black man, Hispanic man, white woman, black woman. The killer is stopped before we get to the Hispanic woman. This is truly “equal opportunity death”. This story enables the author, through her white policewoman heroine Gianna Maglione who is the head of a Hate Crime Unit, to develop her ideas about hate in America which targets all kinds of people especially as she wants to understand “how it happens that a person hates enough to kill” (54). Hate is “big business” in most of America (Night Songs, 14). But, as too often, the real motive turns out to be a personal experience and it makes phobias (racial or sexual) personal idiosyncrasies rather than social ills.

An omnipresent feature in black women’s fiction is the fact that the present murder often has a cause in a more or less distant past. A past event triggers a whole chain of events. Past traumas are not forgotten. They poison people’s lives until they have to do something about it. This is often presented as a form of madness. Certainly, in Eleanor Bland’s Done Wrong, two of the three girls, now women, are seriously disturbed. Other examples are Tell no Tales, by the same author, where the murder of a black girl 30 years ago has repercussions today. In Valerie Wilson Wesley’s Easier to Kill the rape of Mandy by her stepfather resulted in her leading a wild life, having a baby daughter in poor circumstances and killing her. Twenty years later, murders are committed by the boyfriend to avenge this death. The murders in Charlotte Carter’s Rhode Island Red originate, as we have seen, in a story about Charlie Parker. Years later, people are still killing one another to get hold of his saxophone. In Coq au Vin, it is a music scam that took
place twenty years ago which triggers the murders in the book. In Judith Smith-Levin’s *Do not Go Gently*, the present murders originate in the childhood of the rapist. The rapist’s father left his wife for a black woman; subsequently, his mother used him as her lover, hence his hatred of black women. In Martha McMahan Grimes’s *Somebody Else’s Child*, a woman kills eight women so as to protect her son’s political career by erasing all traces of a “shameful” past, thirty years ago. And in Penny Mickelbury’s *Keeping Secrets* the murderer turns out to have killed her husband twenty years before on discovering he was gay. Out of the mental hospital, she starts killing again, gays who want to come out of the closet: she wants to save their partners from the embarrassment.

Does this desire to connect past and present have anything to do with coming to terms with the past of slavery, the mystery of people’s origins and with the more recent past of official racial segregation and discrimination? It certainly is a pessimistic vision because it seems that if the past was bad, the present cannot be better. Paula Woods gives her own explanation:

> Because I love L. A. and feel it’s always gotten a bad rap as a tarted-up tinseltown with no history or culture, I also tried to bring a bit of historical perspective to the proceedings and predicaments in which Charlotte finds herself embroiled. For example, in *Inner City Blues*, which is set in the 1992 riots, Charlotte unravels the long-ago disappearance of a black radical, which gave me a chance to comment on everything from the Zoot Suit Riots of 1943 to the Black Panthers and the Symbionese Liberation Army.

Indignation is a reaction to murder or not, depending on who dies, for example indignation at the murder of children, or relatives or friends of the heroine, or innocent passers-by. There can be downright satisfaction as with Blanche and the sheriff in *Blanche on the Lam*.

Indignation escalates one notch when the killing is particularly odious or vicious and when we get to see some of the life and thinking of the killer. In *Inner City Blues*, the killer of the heroine’s baby and husband is not a person we get to know so we remain with our primary indignation. But in *Green Money* the killers (in the first murder) are teenagers who are “just having fun” and whose minds we get into a bit and that makes them real persons and not just killing machines. In the same way as we get to love the heroine, we get to hate the villains.

But there is also overkill, as if the writers, like their murderers, could not stop after the first killing. In *Green Money*, the first woman, the bag-lady, is killed in horrible circumstances: although she was an awful person, a racist, did she deserve to burn alive? Perhaps after all, if we think of the Ku Klux Klan. With the second murder, a prostitute bled to death, we feel more sympathy, especially as she was a good friend of the heroine and we are made to empathize with her pain. But when it comes to the third murder, with parts of a woman’s body carefully placed in an ice-box, too much becomes too much and it stops proving anything, especially as this murder is not related to the others and is just a common murder about money whereas the first murders meant to show the dangers of violent video games and the dehumanization of rich white kids out on a power trip.

**Other forms of violence: -1-at the personal level**

All the women, except Nora DeLoach, give instances of verbal sexist violence. The heroine is the target, among others. These are women who “do not know their places.” It seems
that the police force is the worst place for this type of behavior, the targets being female officers. Eleanor Bland makes Marti MacAllister the target of her colleagues Slim and Cowboy’s sexist jokes. Although this is taken calmly, the sheer repetitiveness of it, book after book, and the fact that the two cops (one black, one white) are seen as immature and faintly despicable, drives home the obnoxiousness of this form of harassment.

28 All, except Nora DeLoach, also report instances of verbal racist violence. The heroine may not always be the target, but other people are. Tamara Hayle, Valerie Wilson Wesley’s heroine, left the police because her colleagues insulted her son and his friends. Similarly, Theresa Galloway, Terry McManah Grimes’s protagonist, has to deal with the damage caused to her son by racist insults at school. Mali Anderson, Grace Edwards’s central character punched a cop for putting a poster representing an ape on her locker and got suspended from the NYPD. Penny Mickelbury mentions anti-Jewish insults in the course of one of her narratives. Barbara Neely points out derogatory forms of address and the lack of respect of whites towards the black maid.

29 Those two forms of violence, sexist and racist, are often combined, “black bitch” being the most common insult but a wide range is offered throughout the novels. Starletta Duvall is called a “just hot spade broad” (Do not Go Gently, 13), a prostitute in Night Songs is called “stupid nigger cunt” (2). Cooper, the white male cop in Paula Woods’s Inner City Blues is also verbally abusive on both counts.

30 Physical sexist violence is very present in all those narratives, mostly sexual abuse, but also sheer physical battering of the strong (husband or father or even brother) against the weak. Most women have stories of rape. Blanche, Barbara Neely’s detecting maid, was raped by an employer’s brother. In Chassie West’s Sunrise, girls (black and white) are raped, photographed naked (by white men) and do not dare complain, especially the black girls: it is a white man’s word against a black woman’s. When they report it, nothing happens. But here again, the desire to surprise at the end weakens the discourse and the plot. It destroys the political message. A white woman is raped. She kills the rapist and the man who saw her do it because she wants to marry a rich man and spolit goods were not acceptable fifteen years ago! And now, she kills the good doctor with the heel of her shoe because he might find out the truth. The reader, who first empathized with the victims of rape, is left with this woman for whom rape is not so serious after all since she is interested in is money and she will kill to preserve it. No question here of public opinion having evolved about rape. Similarly, in Nora DeLoach’s Mama Traps a Killer several women are raped. But as this just a red herring and the main story loses strength.

31 The writers seem especially concerned with abuse of young girls by fathers or stepfathers. All of Eleanor Bland’s novels deal with this, often as a central part of the plot. It reflects the involvement of the author in her personal life on this issue. In Dead Time, she deals with runaway children, abused and raped, who live on the margins of society, in the street. In Slow Burn, she writes about the forced prostitution of 10-12 year-old girls (preferably black of a light shade) for kiddie porn. It seems that, to Eleanor Bland, the violence of murder is not the most horrifying. Marti MacAllister, the heroine, copes with it coolly, professionally. Often, murder is but the conclusion, or the consequence, or other forms of violence which have sometimes gone on for years. A murder is quickly done. Abuse of all kinds can last for years. Gone Quiet is the story of a man who abused young girls sexually, his own stepdaughters and daughter and neighbors’ girls. The girls become traumatized adults. A weakness of the book (a fictional weakness but a realistic conclusion) is that the victims are too distressed to seek revenge and a third party does it.
instead. In *Keep Still*, the root of the murder is also the abuse of children, especially that of a seven-year-old girl abused by her parents, who complained and was sent away to a foster family with her brothers. When the children were given back to their parents, the girl was killed for “telling” and one of the brothers took on the role of his father as “punisher”.

In Judith Smith-Levin’s *The Hoodoo Man*, a teenager is repeatedly beaten, sexually abused and then sold to a homosexual voodoo man. Egged on, or hypnotized by a white “witch” woman using “black” magic, he kills his whole family: his father for having beaten him, his mother for letting him do it and his brothers to save them the pain of being taken away and put in institutions. Having a white woman trigger him into killing diminishes the horror of his own act and is a nice fictional device to alleviate the guilt. But it also says, in a way, that abuse is not so terrible and that, left to his own devices, he would have done nothing about it. The white woman here is clearly evil as she also tries to steal Star’s boyfriend, an unforgivable sin.

Other examples of abuse are Mandy Magic, in Wesley’s *Easier to Kill*, who was raped by her stepfather, Patricia Conley (in Evelyn Coleman’s *What a Woman’s Gotta Do*) who was abandoned, then raped by her foster father or the horrific description of a crack-house with girl child prostitutes in Grace F. Edwards’ *If I Should Die*. Barbara Neely too is very much concerned with the abuse, sexual or not, of children. Blanche will intervene every single time. Her description, in the fourth novel of the series, of Blanche’s own rape and of how this has affected her is very powerful.

Many acts of physical racist violence are also woven into the plots. Nan is attacked in the Paris metro by skinheads (*Coq au Vin*). In Penny Mickelbury’s *One Must Wait*, there is a story about a black girl passing for white on an allwhite campus who got engaged to a white student. Her own brother betrayed her out of loyalty to his fraternity “brother”. As a result, the girl was gangraped for three days and lost her mind. What is most striking about this story is that we see that, again, “black” and “woman” are inseparable since the black is punished as a woman and that men’s loyalty is to men first, whatever the color (although, in this case, it stretches credibility).

Barbara Neely often refers to the racist violence of the past, at the time of slavery or from the Ku Klux Klan, especially the rapes of women.

The butt of racist attacks can be a man, for example Lance Mitchell, a doctor in *Inner City Blues*. Paula Woods describes and denounces the racism of the police who equals “black” with “criminal”. It is Charlotte and another woman who save Mitchell from the hands of the white male police.

Many of these forms of violence are highlighted by the fact that the heroine or her client has experienced one of them in a very painful way which has left scars that still affect her today. Also, the murder/violent death of a loved one is a much used device. The characters (usually the main heroines) have to make their peace with it.

**Other forms of violence: -2- at the societal level**

The theme of ghetto violence, unsurprisingly, appears in many novels, as these mostly take place in urban settings. Terry McMahan Grimes describes Theresa Galloway’s mother’s neighborhood and her fears. In Eleanor Bland’s fiction, we are told Marti left Chicago to get away from big-city crime (her first husband got killed in drug-related
 Violence breeds violence. In *Easier to Kill*, poverty leads a young girl to kill her baby, accidentally; poverty again leads a man to beat his wife, then his stepdaughter kills him, and murders follow one another. There seems to be no end as the teenager who killed as a child kills again in similar circumstances.

Other forms of violence are also present. In Margaret Cuthbert’s *The Silent Cradle*, women’s and children’s lives are shown as being of little value.

A man who needs money is prepared to endanger women’s lives in labor to force a competitor to sell his birth center. Doctor Rae Duprey’s mother bled to death in an ambulance. No blame is given for bad health care but the implication is that the poor get poor health service. Inadequate care results in death for the poor, both blacks and whites. Health is money.

Penny Mickelbury builds her novel *One Must Wait* on an interesting concept which she calls “environmental racism”: the disposal of waste and byproducts from chemical plants that are so toxic that the land is destroyed forever and the health of people endangered. She writes: “the next great civil rights issue was that the neighborhoods of the poor and people of color were being turned into the toxic waste and garbage dumps of the nation” (138). The fact that the criminal is a black man passing for white might also be symbolically relevant, showing that nothing is to be gained by imitating the greed of white capitalists. In *Blanche Cleans up*, there is a similar subplot with lead poisoning in buildings that causes various illnesses and, some people think, violent behavior (although Blanche does not think it is true).

**Women and law and order**

As targets of sexist and racist violence, women cannot remain in the police very long.

Many authors write about the distrust blacks feel toward the police, with special reference to the Rodney King case or more generally to police brutality towards blacks. For example, Mali Anderson was fired for hitting another cop who had insulted her and now studies to do social work. She is fighting the NYPD in court. Starletta Duvall was harassed, as a woman, at the beginning of her career. Like Mali Anderson, one day she “snapped” and hit a cop who had gone too far and punched him. Tamara Hayle left the police when her son became the target of racist violence. Leigh Ann Warren in *Sunrise* is leaving the police because of burnout, because she feels she is getting uncontrollably violent. Charlotte Justice has remained on the force to do justice. Will she stay? It is doubtful.

The two policewomen who have no problem with the institution are white. Gianna Maglione commands respect as a chief and thus does not seem to suffer from sexist attacks. The police force is her life: she follows after her father. Kelly Wylie (in Tracey Tillis’s *Deadly Masquerade*) is white and a sergeant in Internal Affairs, not the object of sexism in her job, or, at least, it does not really ruffle her. “To be black and a cop, you’ve got to be pretty weird,” says Nan in *Rhode Island Red* (18).

Violence on the heroines is the least interesting form of violence as it is such a traditional fictional device: in the end, the hero/ine has to find her/himself in danger. The final
confrontation lasts but a few minutes. The heroine is either rescued by the cavalry or rescues herself with her own gun or thanks to her fighting abilities, she soon gets over it and in the same way as male heroes who repeatedly get beaten on the head and shot at and still go doggedly on.

47 Few and far between are the heroines who can really fight (and have to). Patricia Conley (Coleman) has a black belt in aikido and the reader experiences some jubilation when she beats up villains. Even fewer kill: only Starletta Duvall who fights men successfully and even kills the killer in *Do not Go Gently* and P. I. Tamara Hayle who kills (twice) do so. The other women, if they can fight, also get beaten. As a reaction to violence, they have fits of rage and violence and/or feel physically sick and very sad.

48 Theresa Galloway is a good example of mixed feelings: she is frightened by the ambient violence of her mother’s neighborhood but she also gets angry at the noise, the murders and the neglected children to the point of almost killing. She feels a terrible sadness at the wasted lives: women on crack and turning to prostitution to support their addiction, neglected and battered children, teenagers who cheer at the violence. She says: “I was out of my element. Way out. The streets were just too mean for me.” (*Somebody Else’s Child*, 88)

49 As to crime and punishment, the heroines, as in most crime fiction, put an end to (some of) the violence either by putting the guilty person(s) in the hands of the justice system, or having them killed, or killing them themselves, directly or indirectly. Sometimes, there is a departure from this pattern, though.

50 Barbara Neely exercises the most imagination in this domain. In little things she does justice herself: elbowing a black minister who is the owner of dangerous buildings and causing him to splash his coffee, ruining and spraypainting his car, destroying with ammonia an employer’s pictures of naked children, spiking an employer’s food, sending pornographic videos to various groups and people to expose a “family values” politician. She clearly rejoices when a racist sheriff is killed. In *Blanche and the Talented Tenth*, she punches the man who caused the three deaths. The most interesting is the resolution at the end of *Blanche Cleans up*. Blanche distrusts the police, to say the least and manages to avoid having to deal with them. But, at the end of this novel, she delegates the resolution to a group of black men (Ex-Cons for Community Safety) and finds out later that they have killed the murderer, so it means that, indirectly, she has killed him, and she feels as burdened with this as if she had pulled the trigger herself. Which only shows that no murder can be satisfactorily resolved and, perhaps, that women cannot trust men to clean up properly for them. She believes girls should be taught self-defense rather than press charges in court.

51 Sometimes the author uses her imagination to find a suitable punishment that is not either prison or death. In *Slow Burn*, Eleanor Bland punishes the pimp who exploited children for pornographic purposes by having him shot and paralyzed for the rest of his life. Another symbolic “punishment” is that of Mandy Magic, in *Easier to Kill*, a woman who killed her crying baby when she was a teenager living in poverty. As she had extenuating circumstances, her life is saved but she will never be able to speak again, which for a person who has made her fortune with her voice (on a radio show) is a terrible punishment. Other than that, the endings are conventional enough.

52 All these crimes paint a bleak picture of society. Order may be restored in a small area but all the rest is going on, hopelessly: drugs, abuse. The world of these novels is a violent one
and solving one crime (or a series of crimes) is not going to alter the fact that violence goes on, relentlessly.

Black women writers (with few exceptions) write about the suffering caused by the various forms of violence. Pain is a recurring word in the heroines’ language and they use all sorts of tactics to avoid it. But rage comes soon after pain: another recurring word. And this is why reading these novels, in spite of their imperfections which are inevitably, it seems, part of the genre, makes such tonic reading.

It is, in short, a literature of empathy, denunciation, anger and commitment:

Charlotte has become a part of my psyche now, and writing of her adventures in a post-modern paradise is a way of exploring and exorcising the demons and misconceptions that plague us all. (Woods, 1998)

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Works Cited


NOTES

1. A translation of Raymond Depardon’s 1996 film title, Afriques: Comment ça va avec la douleur?, in which it is explained that this is the question Tubu people greeted him with in Chad when they worried about his well-being.


4. The only ones I can think of are Lisa Saxton’s Caught in a Rundown, Barbara Neely’s Blanche and the Talented Tenth where we think there are murders when in fact the deaths are only indirectly so, and perhaps Chassie West’s Loss of Innocence.


ABSTRACTS

Black women’s crime fiction is a literature of empathy, denunciation, anger and commitment. The authors write from a double perspective: women as targets both of male violence and of racial and racist violence. This article examines the motives for killing used in this fiction, the place of the woman detective and the suffering caused by the various forms of violence.
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Teaches English as a foreign language to science students at Toulouse III University. She is the head of a research team concerned with language learning and teaching. She has published extensively in this domain but also in the field of feminist literature and more especially crime fiction.
In recent years, I have made several presentations on Neely’s and Mosley’s work and have sometimes had the feeling that American audiences, and to some extent Indian and German scholars trained in the United States, were puzzled that my analysis did not refer much to the critical theories currently applied to black detective fiction. The reason is that, regardless of how intrinsically interesting such theories may be, I am not convinced they do justice to the literary complexity of Neely’s and Mosley’s writing whose most unique qualities are sometimes peripheral to the theories.

Two examples will serve to illustrate my contention in a number of ways. The first is an article written by Bonnie C. Plummer in which she examines Barbara Neely’s work in light of the theories of Steven Soitos and Kathleen Gregory Klein. The second is an article on Walter Mosley and Barbara Neely written by Patricia A. Turner, in which she adopts a feminist point of view.

In 1999, Plummer published an article entitled "Subverting the Voice: Barbara Neely’s African American Detective". Plummer demonstrates, among other things, how the four tropes that Soitos says are shared by African Americans in their writing of detective fiction apply to the work of Barbara Neely. My argument is that while some aspects of Soitos’s theory illuminate Neely’s work, others are not necessarily relevant to it.

The first of Soitos’s four tropes is the "detective persona", which refers to the black detective’s interest in the social and political atmosphere inscribed in racial prejudice. Plummer is justified in applying this first trope to the character of Blanche White. Neely’s detective fits the criterion: she "is aware of her blackness and her perception of the world is definitely through that blackness" (Plummer, 80).

To substantiate her point, Plummer quotes Blanche: "This is how we’ve survived in this country all the time by knowing when to act like we believe what we have been told and when to act like we know what we know” (Blanche on the Lam, 73).

We might add that many more of Blanche’s comments, or rather those taken from the third-person narrative that give an even more intimate view of her feelings, could be
added to illustrate Soitos’s first trope. For instance, in reference to black workers, Blanche says:

Men like Nate and women like her were the people, the folk, the mud from which the rest were made. It was their hands and blood and sweat that made everything [...] They ought to have been appreciated for being the wattle that held the walls together. Instead they were expendable, interchangeable, rarely missed, hardly regarded, easily forgotten” (*Blanche on the Lam*, 149).

Plummer also justifiably notes Blanche’s denunciation of the issue of skin color, which even affects the way African Americans accept and reject each other. She points out that the “color struck discussion” covers four pages of the novel *Blanche Among the Talented Tenth*.

Yet what seems just as interesting to me as Blanche’s denunciation of the American obsession with the “melanin issue” is the inner contradiction that leads Blanche herself never to fail to mention the color (and its degree) of the people she meets. She complains that “everybody in the country got color on their brain [...] It would be nice just for a week to have our color like tonsils or toenails or something else nobody really gives a damn about” (*Blanche Among the Talented Tenth*, 9), however, her first comments about people are almost invariably about their color. She describes them as "high yellow", "buttery yellow", "old gold", "light skinned", "café con leche", "milk with a dollop of coffee", "medium brown", "deep brown", "dark skinned", and "eggplant black". She even mentions whites whose complexions are so dark they could pass for "people of color" (*Blanche Among the Talented Tenth*, 10, 11, 24, 34, 40, 158).

I would add that despite Blanche’s overt discourse praising the beauty of the members of her community, at times it seems that she is more attracted to the idea of black people than she is to their reality. When she contemplates a crowd of African Americans from a distance, her words echo those of Langston Hughes’s “Poem”:

> The night is beautiful
> So the faces of my people
> The stars are beautiful
> So the eyes of my people.

While she is indeed fascinated with the beauty of a group of anonymous black people:

> Every black face was like a picture of the world: one or more of a zillion shades of brown or black; lips from dime thin to bee stung plump; eyes that slanted up or down or were round as flat coins; flat noses, fat ones, long and pointed ones. Black folks had them all. (*Blanche Cleans Up*, 77)

Blanche is much less enthusiastic about the black individuals who inhabit her everyday world. Close contact with black neighbors and colleagues seem to inspire more annoyance and sarcasm than poetry. She sees in her colleague Carrie “a plain faced, dark brown skinned woman”. (*Blanche Cleans Up*, 6) The use of the term "plain faced" itself shows that for all her professed rejection of mainstream American criteria for beauty, Blanche is not above applying them.

Similarly, her professed contempt for and avoidance of the black bourgeoisie, which welcomes only light skinned Blacks, is constantly challenged by the choices she makes. She emphatically longs for a vacation in a typical poor black resort “with erratic plumbing and rickety furniture, greasy but abundant food where evenings ring with shouts and laughter,” (*Blanche Among the Talented Tenth*, 7); nonetheless she settles for an exclusive black bourgeois resort where she “has to” wear designer clothes. The reason given for her vacationing there - her children have been invited by classmates - is
unexpected, given the fact that Blanche’s forte is that she does not let her children get away with what she thinks is wrong. Her sending the children to a school where dark-skinned students are ostracized is just as disconcerting. It certainly does not concord with her hope that her daughter will hang out with revolutionary black girls or her claim that she does not want her children to pick any “hincty ideas” or develop any dumb idea about a lawyer or a doctor being a better person than someone who hauls the garbage” (Blanche Among the Talented Tenth, 7).

Blanche’s declarations of love for her people are constantly offset against the distance she maintains relative to even her most intimate relations. She seems to feel more affection for her black friends and family when she speaks to them on the telephone than when in their presence. She even seems to prefer speaking to dead black people rather than with live ones on the telephone, and among the deceased she has a particular weakness for those who have been dead a long time. She entertains fond memories of ancestors whom she has never met but who, she believes, have entrusted her with a nurturing mission towards her community. At the same time, she is enraged with her recently deceased sister who has left behind two children to feed. In fact, Blanche needs spatial and temporal distance so much that she even has trouble putting up with her own presence. She loves her black self as long as she can identify it with “Night Girl”, an imaginary personality that is invisible, eternally young and powerful, but she is much less enthusiastic about her real flesh-and-blood self; and cannot stand a “Blanche smelling room” (Blanche Cleans Up, 226).

The ambivalence of Blanche’s attitude towards blackness is at least as interesting as her consciousness of racism.

Soitos’s second trope is “double consciousness”, which he connects in detective work with the use of “the trickster qualities of masking”. Applying this trope to Neely’s work also seems justified. There are many instances of disguised or mistaken identity and of acts which Blanche performs to fool others, but while the relevance to Neely’s work of the double consciousness trope work is undeniable, Blanche’s ambiguous attitude regarding the use of the trickster’s ways is perhaps even more interesting.

When Blanche acts like the trickster, her behavior is presented as legitimate, but when other characters put on the same act, she denounces their attitude as servile and unacceptable. In Blanche Cleans Up, she becomes highly indignant at a party when she sees representatives of her community being obsequious to a white politician. Yet she herself is a servant in the same politician’s household. As such she willingly "shows signs of pleasant stupidity and puts on her "Butterfly McQueen" act for her employer’s benefit (Blanche on the Lam, 16, 153). Exactly what makes Blanche a trickster and the other characters “butt sucking maggots” is unclear or, rather, is relative and a matter of personal appreciation. The preacher betraying his community on a grand scale to increase his personal wealth may make Blanche’s grinning and curteying look harmless by comparison but one can argue that in her small ways Blanche betrays the dignity of her people. Her acting stupid is not motivated by constraint. Having come of age not under slavery but in the 1960s, being clever and encouraged by her mother who "had not approved of her decision to continue to do domestic work instead of being a nurse or some other "mother-proud professional" (Blanche on the Lam, 19), Blanche deliberately chose to be a servant because "she does not have to take no mess from nobody" (Blanche Cleans Up, 3), the job does “not have the tyranny of a supervisor out to make promotion” (Blanche on the Lam, 63) and "she was very good at and proud of what she did" (Blanche on
the Lam, 65). Such statements are puzzling from someone who “hates waiting on tables and being treated like another utensil” (Blanche on the Lam, 50) and picking up other people’s dirty clothes, someone who works “six days a week and still does not make enough money to take care of herself and her children” (Blanche on the Lam, 84, 4), whose employers, white or black, are “nasty as castor oil” (Blanche on the Lam, 8), “disdain her to death” (Blanche on the Lam, 215), are arrogant and talk to her like she has a “dustpan for a brain” (Blanche Among the Talented Tenth, 46), not to mention that one of them rapes her. Some of her employers are racists, pedophiles, murderers, large-scale polluters of the environment and embezzlers of poor people’s savings. The only decent one is mentally retarded.

Blanche’s frequent claim that she finds pleasure in being a superb cook, is not substantiated because when she prepares a meal she rarely goes past the first stages of cutting and slicing. At that point she is likely to put everything in the microwave oven or let someone else finish the job. In the end, it seems that the only satisfaction Blanche gets from her job lies in the fact that she occasionally “let her finger slip into somebody’s drink, put too much salt or hot pepper in the eggs rancheros or add a couple tablespoons of cat food to the beef bourguignonmone (Blanche Cleans Up, 16). She also gets secret pleasure from contravening her employers in using their bathtubs and sitting on their sofas when they are not around. “Putting on a dumb act” (Blanche on the Lam, 16), she spies on them and talks about their weaknesses and silly habits to amuse her friends (Blanche on the Lam, 40). These trickster compensations seem to be small compared to what Blanche gives up for them and one may wonder who, between the servant and her employer, really fools the other, which gives the presence of the second trope a rather unexpected dimension.

Soitos’s third trope is “black vernacular” defined as including not only black language, but also black music, black dance and black cuisine. Justifying the relevance of this third trope as Plummer does simply because Blanche spends a lot of time cooking is questionable since, all the above considerations set aside, the text does not provide any details about Blanche’s cooking that would make it representative of the uniqueness of African American cuisine. On the contrary Blanche repeatedly makes "lovely cups of tea", which sound more British than African American, and the food she prepares and serves to her employers seems to be fairly traditional all-American fare – platters of cold meats, sliced turkey, roast beef and ham, steamed carrots, green beans, baked potatoes and frozen lunches slipped into a microwave oven.

At home, she makes meatballs which do not seem particularly African American either and, when ordering food in a restaurant, Blanche might claim that she prefers grits and biscuits to croissants, eggs benedict and lobster. But, in the end, she orders croissants, eggs benedict and lobster. I have been able to find only a few lines mentioning traditional African American food in Neely’s first three novels. One line in Blanche Among the Talented Tenth refers to collards, cornbread, sweet potatoes, fried chicken and grits (58), and two more lines in Blanche Cleans Up (203) mention pigs feet, chitterlings and corn bread. However, in neither case did Blanche prepare the food. Consequently justifying the relevance of the third trope – i.e. black vernacular – on account of Blanche’s cooking, as Plummer does, seems slightly contrived.

Soitos’s fourth trope is “hoodoo”, which refers to the “indigenous syncretic religions of African Americans in the new world.” In the Blanche series, the use of ancestral rituals is interesting, but it can hardly be read the way Soitos defines this trope, as an element of
African culture passed from one generation to the next in order to establish community values.

There simply does not seem to be much continuity in the way Blanche is initiated into ancestral religious practices, at least in the first three novels. In fact, her manner of worship is very much that of an individualist virtually cut off from her past and present community.

Blanche’s attitude reminds one of Ishmael Reed who stated, “Julia Jackson said, when asked the origin of the amulets and talismans in her studio, ‘I make my own stuff. It saves money and it’s as good. People who has to buy their stuff ain’t using their heads’” (Reed, 298).

Blanche tends to create her own religious rituals by sheer force of will and is not always “in touch with her inner self”. Her alleged feelings of ease with ancestral rituals is often thrown into doubt by the presence of a semantic field which reveals contradictions between her will for communion with her ancestors, particularly the female ones, and a sort of repulsion when actually faced with the rituals she invents for herself. Her spiritual experience at the beach in Blanche Among the Talented Tenth is a case in point. She emphatically describes her need to connect with her first ancestral mother, the ocean, which she calls mother water:

The sea was the place where she found the peace and cleansing her friends said they found in church or the mosque (Blanche Among the Talented Tenth, 61).

This was where she needed to be, always needed to be: in the open, barefoot and totally sure that she, the sand, the water and the wind were one (Blanche Among the Talented Tenth, 22).

Yet when she actually enters the sea “every muscle of her body clenched from the shock of the cold water. She fought to control the clatter of her teeth. Her wet skirt held her calves captive...” (Blanche Among the Talented Tenth, 62).

There is definitely an opposition between her desire for communion with the ocean that is supposed to bring peace, love and intimacy and the unpleasant experience of the actual cold, brutal mass of water. This opposition easily reads as a metaphor for the experience of slaves born near warm African seas who were brutally confronted with cold American shores. The reference to being held captive is never a positive one, and in an African American context the connotation is particularly negative. “The clatter of her teeth” is strangely reminiscent of the clatter of chains. What is interesting in Neely’s subtext (and here, in my opinion, lays the strength of her writing) is that in the end there is no communion between Blanche and the sea, there is just the “frustration of being near the water but unable to communicate with it” (Blanche Among the Talented Tenth, 22). If we accept Blanche’s view of the ocean as her ancestral mother, the beach episode can be interpreted to reveal even further contradictions in Blanche’s life: it shows her imprisoned by and yet disconnected from her origins. Interestingly, the only water Blanche ever feels comfortable with is the hot sort found in modern American bathrooms.

The presence of the fourth trope is therefore more interesting in bringing out a sense of conflict with, if not rupture from, the past than that it is as an affirmation of the resilience of African American traditions and a sense of community.

When considered in a more recent sociological and historical context, Blanche’s contradictions and ambiguity constitute a creative reflection of the experience of many black women of the generation born in the late 1940s and early 1950s, women who grew
up and were educated in a society that was openly racist and sexist. To what extent the ideology of the civil rights and women's liberation movements succeeded in erasing the self-denigrating values originally imposed on this generation of women by the white male dominated society of their childhood is one of the many interesting issues posed by the Blanche series. The fact that the heroine has feminist convictions cannot be disputed; however, the character is far from being monodimensional. Along with the feminist rhetoric of Neely's heroine, beyond even her determination to forge new attitudes and new forms of human interaction,\(^{10}\) a pre 1960s mode of thought seems to linger. It is perhaps best expressed by a statement from Blanche herself, which will conclude the first part of this presentation:

> The hole of self hatred she had climbed out of as a young woman was still gaping wide and deep. Just because she was not teetering on the edge any more did not mean she could not be lured back (*Blanche Among the Talented Tenth*, 100).

\(^{28}\) My reservations about the systematic application of any particular theory, be it as interesting as Söitos's, also concern the broad feminist approaches often applied to Neely or for that matter to Walter Mosley. I find that there is a tendency among scholars and critics to assume that Neely's depictions of women are positive, while Mosley's are negative. Such readings seem reductive to me and at best debatable.

\(^{29}\) In 1998, Patricia A. Turner wrote an essay entitled "From Talma Gordon to Theresa Galloway: Images of African American Women in Mysteries". In it, Turner examines both Mosley's\(^{11}\) and Neely's heroes. She argues that Mosley's "Easy Rawlins [...] is a decidedly sexist black man" (Turner, 24). To substantiate her point, she quotes the following two passages:

> She could knock a man into Tuesday or she could hold you so tight you felt like a child again in your mother's loving embrace (*A Red Death*, 27).
> Black women, lots of them cooking in the industrial size kitchen and talking loud, laughing and telling stories. But all I really saw was their hands. Working hands. Laying out plates, peeling yams, folding sheets and table cloths into perfect squares, washing drying, stacking and pushing from here to there. Women who lived by working. Brushing the hair of some neighborhood child whose parents were gone either for the night or for good. Cooking yes but there was lots more work for a negro woman. Dressing wounds of men they started being proud of. Punishing children, white and black, and working for god in his house and at home (*A Red death*, 107).

\(^{30}\) At the time that Turner published this article I was unaware of it and I myself used precisely these two passages to support the idea that Mosley depicted black women in a positive way.\(^{12}\) The incident brings all out the point I am trying to make about how the complexity of literary texts lets them escape the molds of literary criticism.

\(^{31}\) Of course, Turner also has a point. It can be argued from these two passages that Mosley likes women to fit the mother stereotype and to be less educated than his male hero. These are obviously depictions of poor women employed in menial jobs. However, what struck me in Mosley's five Easy Rawlins novels was that the recurring words associated with female characters are "warmth", "tenderness", "generosity", "strength", "power", "pleasure", "work" and "food". One is free to interpret such elements in negative ways but their positive side can also be defended.

\(^{32}\) Concerning black women in particular, the combination of the words "black", "sweet" and "beautiful" is virtually a constant of Mosley's writing. Mosley's hero has sexist moments reflecting the ideology of his time, but he generally speaks a language of love
and admiration for women and, in particular, very black women. The only woman he ever marries, Regina, is exceptionally black, as is Etta Mae, the love of his life. When Easy evokes white women – a relatively rare occurrence – they are associated with uneasiness.

I would even argue that Easy’s descriptions of his sexual encounters should not automatically be labeled as chauvinistic. There is tenderness even in his casual encounters, for example with the prostitute Juanita in *A Red Death* or with Carmela Bonita and Betty in *Black Betty*. “Betty in my arms. For years after that kiss I dreamed of it, yearned for it (...). I could run my hands from her head to her feet; not a lover’s stroke but a mother’s (230).

When referring to his moment of sexual passion with Daphne Monnet in *Devil in a Blue Dress*, Easy says:

> When I look back on that night I feel confused. If she wanted me to bleed, I would have been happy to open a vein. Daphne was like a door that had been closed all my life; a door that all of a sudden flung open and let me in. My heart and chest opened wide as the sky for that woman (187).

Upon finding out that Daphne is a black woman, Easy uses the following terms when asking her to stay with him, "We’re both just people, Daphne, that’s what we are" (*Devil in a Blue Dress*, 208). This recognition by Easy of the fact that women are both sexual beings and individuals, that he and they are on the same level when confronted with joy and sorrow, with basic existential issues, is also a constant of Mosley’s writing.

Many of Easy’s evocations of black women read as love poems of the Langston Hughes type: Easy appreciates the women whom Langston Hughes describes in his plays as "huge but shapely". In fact, this is the precise image Easy uses to describe Etta Mae whose physical appearance, "big and strong but still womanly, very womanly" (*Black Betty*, 61), is not really very different from another Hughesian, very dark-skinned heroine, Blanche White who wears queen-size panties and is also employed at menial jobs.

The discourse on women held by Barbara Neely’s Blanche White is certainly an open celebration of the strength and beauty of womanhood. Blanche vehemently and repeatedly affirms the necessity for all women and, in particular, for very dark-skinned black women, to support and help each other. However, such bonding has its limits. When it comes to repressing her lust for another black woman’s husband, Blanche White is no different from Easy Rawlins who fools around with women whose mates are asleep next door. In *Blanche Cleans Up*, when one of Blanche’s old married friends comes to visit, "Blanche knew she was going to have him even if he said Luella [his wife] was standing just outside the door" (*Blanche Cleans Up*, 215).

A Jungian analysis of Neely’s work reveals an underlying discourse on femininity, which is different from the overt discourse in the sense that entities semantically related to the function of container and shelter, which by extension are symbols of the womb and all that is female, are often negative. There are many descriptions of houses, apartments, rooms, closets, sheds and shelters in the Blanche series. These descriptions revolve around the following words: "trapped", "unpleasant", "broken", "damp", "mean", "edgy", "sad", "sagging", "anxious", "forlorn", "nervous", "jumpy", "uneasy", "tension" and "gloom". Even the safest places are bleak. The bomb shelter under the house of Blanche’s old friend Miz Baker has "shattered glass laying at the door" (*Blanche Cleans Up*, 170). The door is scratched and “bears the mark of a long spidery stain”. The light inside is dim; everything is "broken, creepy, dusty, spooky" and the air is "old, fetid, chilly" (*Blanche Cleans Up*, 179). Blanche’s one desire is to get out. Enclosures that are traditionally
protective, nurturing and warm are depicted as cold, uncomfortable and both threatened and threatening. The womb symbols in the Blanche series are places that are either desolate or harmful, if not both. The strength and beauty of womanhood, so present in the overt discourse, are not at all obvious at the subliminal level. Once again we find a sort of double talk and ambiguity.

39 Turning to the issue of sexism, it is difficult to see how Neely’s heroine is less "decidedly sexist" than is Mosley’s hero. For instance, the narrative describes her thoughts upon meeting a tennis instructor: “She looked him up and down. Ummm, soccer thighs. She did not know zip about the game, but she watched it on TV occasionally for the stud muffins, particularly for those long muscular, almost girlish legs and tight butts” (Blanche Cleans Up, 9). There follows a graphic description of what she imagines the man looks like naked.

40 The article by Bonnie C. Plummer I referred to earlier is partly based on the assumption that Blanche fits the theory that Kathleen Gregory Klein expounds in The Woman Detective Gender and Genre. In the tenth chapter of her book, Klein specifies that "feminism rejects the objectification of sex", but the entire scene of sexual intercourse with Leo in Blanche Cleans Up is described from Blanche’s point of view and could easily be read as a lesson in how to dominate and "objectify" one’s partner. "She fed him lightly not wanting to waste his energy on digestion. She rode him like he was the last train away from certain disaster and lay panting and sweaty next to him [...], her floor littered with Leo’s condoms supply" (Blanche Cleans Up, 216).

41 In that scene, Leo remains totally passive, confused and embarrassed. Blanche takes the initiative in everything. After having had the physical satisfaction she wanted from him, she refuses to let him talk – thus silencing him twice since he already stutters – and "shooed him into a cab which gave him exactly forty-five minutes to make his bus" (Blanche Cleans Up, 217).

42 Some would argue that the scene is understandable in the larger context of the story. Still, I wonder how women readers would react if the roles were reversed in this particular scene, that is, if Leo were riding a stuttering desire stricken Blanche and shooed her into a cab after having silenced her for reasons that from his point of view appeared legitimate.16

43 Perhaps, too, Blanche’s attitude "signifies" on traditionally male-oriented literature, but the existence of reverse sexism,17 even if it must not be taken at face value, should at least be acknowledged.

44 The conclusion to this analysis is that the dynamic that stands out in both Easy and Blanche is definitely one of ambiguity and contradiction.18 One of the most obvious and interesting discrepancies lies in their sense of community and class. In this respect, the itinerary followed by the two heroes is similar except for the fact that they take the same road starting from opposite directions. Mosley’s hero repeatedly claims that he wants to get away from the poor black community, but for one reason or another he repeatedly returns to it. Conversely, BarbaraNeely’s heroine professes preference for the poor black community and openly scorns both the rich white world and the rich black one, but somehow she always finds reasons to be in the presence of the rich, be they white, or nearly white.

45 My analysis of the paradoxes exemplified by Easy Rawlins (published in Warring Ideals in Dark Bodies) also applies to Blanche White. Contradictions and ambiguities can be read as
signifiers of social and psychological fracture for African Americans but they should not be interpreted solely as weaknesses. Tensions between black culture and white society, between male ideology and female experience find powerful creative expression in Easy and Blanche. As Henry Louis Gates shows in The Signifying Monkey, the coexistence of opposites, when seen as part of African tradition, is a powerful tool for survival, wisdom and joy. In the ambiguity and bi-polarity which carry them from one type of pronouncement to another type of behavior, we find a clue to what is perhaps these heroes’ basic cultural loyalty to the African-American community. I would add that their ambivalence about blackness and gender may appear negative from an ideological, politically-correct point of view, but that very ambivalence, these very contradictions, are what make the characters true literary figures and not merely one-dimensional ideological vehicles. One of the most interesting aspects of the writing of both authors is that it shed light on the interpenetration of conflicting ideologies through the moments of confusion and incoherence that their characters experience. This complexity that thwarts literary theories is a testimony to the creative talents of Walter Mosley and Barbara Neely.

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Bibliography


NOTES

1. In “Subverting the Voice: Barbara Neely’s African American Detective,” Bonnie C. Plummer uses the theories of Kathleen Klein, Glenwood Irons and Stephen Soitos to demonstrate that Neely’s detective subverts the white male, hardboiled detective formula. We could add that Blanche White also subverts the Black maid stereotype for some of the same reasons; she expresses herself forcefully as both a black person and as a woman. Her open discourse is very much that of black women intellectuals of the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s. Examples of this discourse can be found in works edited by Toni Cade (The Black Woman, An Anthology), Gerda Lerner (Black Women in White America, A Documentary History), Michele Wallace (Black Macho and the Myth of the Super Woman), Gloria T Hull, Patricia Bell Scott and Barbara Smith (All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men but Some of Us Are Brave), Paula Giddins (Where and When I Enter, The Impact of Black Women On Race and Sex in America), Henry Louis Gates Jr. (Reading Black Reading Feminist, A Critical Anthology), Stanley M. James and Abena P. A. Busia (Theorizing Black Feminisms, The Visionary
Pragmatism of Black Women) and Charlotte Pierce Baker (Surviving the Silence, Black Women’s Stories of Rape)

2. In The Blues Detective, Soitos defines "trope" the same way as does M. H. Abrams, that is: "words or phrases (...) used in a way that affects a conspicuous change in what we take to be their standard meaning" (4).

3. My own analysis of Barbara Neely’s heroine is primarily based on the novels Blanche on the Lam, Blanche Among the Talented Tenth and Blanche Cleans Up. A fourth novel, Blanche Passes Go, was published in 2000 but I would not apply to it the conclusions reached for the first three novels. **Blanche Passes Go**, in my opinion, deserves a study of its own.

4. Blanche White’s conflicting personality and own obsession with skin color starts of course with the very “name that made her so defensive” (**Blanche on the Lam**, 30). This name is not only at odds with her very black self, it also originates in two countries, France and England, which in addition to having captured and sold her ancestors have always been rivals. The potential for self destruction given by this conflicting name finds expression in the use of the adjective white which often qualifies the people, elements or objects that threaten the heroine. For instance the phrase “the knife blade shone white” (**Blanche on the Lam**, 198) describing a situation where Blanche is being attacked by the owner of the knife, seems to imply at the subliminal level that Blanche White is part of the attack against herself.

5. When it comes to the poor, it also seems that Blanche is more attracted to the needy of her imagination than to those experiencing the reality of poverty. Her attitude towards the material possessions of the rich is decidedly ambiguous. They are at one and the same time the object of her scorn and of her admiration: "Lord if that stuck up Helen Robinson could see me now. Blanche grinned to herself and pressed her feet a little deeper into the plush carpeting. She ran her hand across the glove leather seat. Money she thought** (**Blanche on the Lam**, 33). “A sauna! Imagine having a sauna in your own bathroom” (**Blanche Cleans Up**, 89).

6. Cf Hélène Le Dantec-Lowry’s « De lieu en lieu, de place en place: le parcours des domestiques africaines-américaines ».

7. Blanche’s love life tends to parallel her life as a cook. She prides herself on having powerful womanly needs but most of the time does not seem to care once the preliminary stage of a relationship has been reached. A study of symbols applied to gender relationships confirms and accentuates the politics of distance and separation at work in her life. In **Blanche Passes Go** (37), her bedroom has a lock on the door and nails hammered into the window frames so that they cannot be raised enough for a man to crawl inside. There is a “hunting knife under her pillow, a foot long pipe beside her bed and another just inside the door in case she needed to bash somebody’s brains out”.

8. “She was determined to prove the power of will over blood” (**Blanche on the Lam**, 182).

9. In fact, she enjoys it to the extent that, despite having been raped by the son of her white boss who finds her in his bathtub, she does not renounce taking baths at her employers’places. Her attitude towards situations related to water is ambiguous in other ways, in **Blanche on the Lam** she pictures her affection for her mother and children as a lake in the middle of which they are floating (125). The positive side of this image is, however, counterbalanced by the fact that one of the female murderers uses a lake as the place in which to drown children.

10. The fact that the Blanche series deals with issues concerning not only black women but also with those affecting the poor, the handicapped, abused children, homosexuals and even victims of lead poisoning is in accordance with the dominant contemporary discourse of black women intellectuals. The first Blanche novel was published in 1992, one year after the Second Black Feminism Seminar at Spelman College where participants repeatedly described black feminism as a “multiple level engagement which dises the liberation from sexual and racial oppression with the liberation from other forms of oppression”. The academic work I have read and most of the reviews and comments from readers I have found on the Internet describe Blanche as
“strong, principled, resolute”. They refer to her as “an independent woman”, “a feminist”, “a feminocentric type”, “a real woman”, “a force to be reckoned with”, “a woman of stature”.

11. Walter Mosley had published Devil in a Blue Dress, A Red Death, White Butterfly, A Little Yellow Dog and Gone Fishin. The latter is not a detective novel but features the same characters as the detective series.

12. My presentation was first delivered in French on April 1997 at the conference “Du dire à l’être, tensions identitaires dans la littérature nord-américaine”, organized by the Equipe de recherches en littérature et civilisation des pays anglophones at the University of Caen. It was published in English in PALARA, no. 4, Fall 2000, ISSN: 1093-5398.

13. See Tambourines to Glory, Little Ham and Simply Heavenly.

14. Examples abound: “[Blanche] thought about what women have always been and done for each other since the first human breath (Blanche and the Talented Tenth, 124)”, “Women like us need our girl friends (Blanche and the Talented Tenth, 129)” Yet, as I previously mentioned, Blanche reverts to American mainstream criteria of beauty when she finds Carrie “plain faced”. What is more, Carrie’s alleged lack of physical appeal is repeatedly associated with a kind of mild stupidity and narrow mindedness. Inez, another black cleaning lady “does not know sunshine from shoe polish” (Blanche Cleans Up, 116). The black women characters who find mercy in Blanche’s eyes are either very young ones like Shaquita in Blanche Cleans Up or unusually attractive ones, like Tina in Blanche Among the Talented Tenth, “whose eyes were meant to break hearts. Her face could have been the model for a profile on an African coin. Her full features were perfectly balanced” (67). Coincidentally these exceptionally beautiful young women are also remarkably gifted intellectually and nothing indicates that they will become maids. So, if Blanche were to apply to herself the same criteria to assess her own beauty and achievements in life as the ones she applies to others, she would have no reason to be proud of her fiftyish, size sixteen, ancillary self.

15. Houses are often explicitly described as having personalities and powers comparable to those of people: “Blanche believed in the power of houses” (Blanche on the Lam, 15). “The minute the house sensed she understood it to be a living, breathing, watching creature with a personality and intentions of its own, the house confided in her” (Blanche Cleans Up, 104). At the subliminal level images of uncomfortable houses, rooms and shelters, their association with threat and pain may also reflect Blanche’s uneasy attitude towards her own body/womb which was once raped. The frequency of the negative images of houses in the first three novels may in fact balance out the surprisingly brief and casual mention of the rape itself. The character, so outspoken about sensitive issues of any sort avoids the discussion of her own rape, which becomes central and finds a form of closure only in the fourth novel. Linked to the desolate aspect of the rooms/wombs are sharply cutting objects – knives, pieces of glass – or elements related to the cutting process like butcher’s blocks. Interestingly the sharp objects enclosed in the often threatening rooms are presented in a rather positive, even life-saving way. They may be symbolically related to and reflect on Blanche’s happy pro-abortion attitude. Blanche, who went through a teenage abortion herself, “jumps for joy” when she realizes that Shaquita still has time to abort (Blanche Cleans Up, 64), becomes depressed when the girl decides to keep her baby and hides her smile when the father leaves the pregnant girl, leaving her no choice but to have an abortion. Still, to go back to the semantics of the text, butchers knives and blocks, even presented in a positive way, hold a symbolism at least partially related to rupture, sacrifice and death. On another level for a black woman of Blanche’s (and Barbara Neely’s) generation the sociopolitical context surrounding the issue of abortion may have been less clear than the character’s militant discourse suggests. At the second Black Feminism Seminar at Spelman College in 1991, Evelyn L. Barbee and Marilyn Little talked of “the effort of African American women to balance their rights not to have unwanted children with their fear of genocidal or international policies (cf. Theorizing Black Feminisms, 192), and Loretta J Ross noted that in the nineteen seventies white conservatives
saw family planning as an assault on the traditional values of motherhood while some black male radicals saw it as a race and class-directed eugenics program, thus the assault on birth control and abortion came both from the right and from the left (cf. *Theorizing Black Feminisms*, 154). From another point of view, that of anthropology, Blanche White, if only because of her name and positive attitude towards cutting items corresponds to Gilbert Durand’s definition of the archetypal “héros solaire” (cf. *Structures anthropologiques de l’imaginaire*). The “héros solaire” is a fierce enemy of all that dwells in caves, grottoes and dark places that are associated with horror and evil. The “héros solaire” is a shining, white, male figure who keeps things at a distance and whose sharp edged weapons, usually swords and arrows, cut, divide, purify and bring light and order to obscurity and chaos.

16. Blanche’s most legitimate reasons for treating Leo the way she does apparently are that “maybe that was what irritated her the most. It was as if he had decided to wear her down with kindness and decency” (*Blanche on the Lam*, 21).

17. One can argue that forms of reverse sexism and double standards are sometimes expressed in the Blanche series. In *Blanche Among the Talented Tenth*, Blanche and her soul sisters refer to Mattie who misses “the good old days when women were strong and men were convenient (28)” as a “visionary feminist writer”, a “living treasure” and a “walking shrine” (69) even though Mattie chose to marry a rich white man, bear his children and be supported by him in a life of luxury. They do not consider that Mattie has betrayed her race, class or independence as a woman, apparently simply because she says that she was never in love with her husband to begin with. Blanche is not so open-minded about black men marrying white women or having white lovers. About Donnie, a gay black male who has a white lover she says: “being gay did not relieve you from your “white is better” slave heritage” (*Blanche Cleans Up*, 117) but when it comes to Mick the lesbian she remarks “years ago she’d have had an attitude because Mick’s lover was not black but the older she got, the more certain she became that someone you loved who loved you back was what was important” (*Blanche Cleans Up*, 147).

18. Neely and Mosley started publishing their novels in the early nineteen nineties but that is not all that the two authors have in common. Their heroes have a discourse that always takes place on two levels. Perhaps both are, to use Barbara Neely’s formula, “weakened by the idea of a thing and the real thing” (*Blanche Cleans Up*, 125).

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**ABSTRACTS**

This paper examines different aspects of Walter Mosley and Barbara Neely’s writings whose complexity sometimes has difficulty fitting into the mold of literary theories on black detective fiction. It argues that the layer of ambivalence in Mosley and Neely’s novels on issues of blackness, gender and social class may appear negative from an ideological point of view, but that this very ambivalence is what makes the characters true literary figures and not merely one-dimensional ideological vehicles.
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IV. The color of crime
Identity Politics: the Private Eye ("I") in Walter Mosley’s Detective Fiction

Alison D. Goeller

In a June 2002 issue of Newsweek Malcolm Jones points to the crime novel as perhaps the only real source of contemporary social realism in America. “Once a high-protein staple of the American literary diet,” Jones writes, “social realism fell from favor” (86). Today, according to Jones, “crime writers, black and white alike, are tackling the volatile subject of race with a daring conspicuously lacking in mainstream fiction” (87). So-called ethnic detective fiction in particular, dealing with marginalized, colonized figures, clearly goes beyond mere entertainment, which is primarily why the genre has caught the attention of academics and social historians. Like their predecessors, the hard-boiled novels of the thirties, which, as David Madden suggests in his introduction to Tough Guy Writers of the Thirties, deal with an “indifferent, violent, deceptive world” that treats the tough guy “like an object” (xviii), much ethnic detective fiction has imbedded in it strategies for exposing the social and economic disparities that ethnic Americans face. Crime becomes a metaphor for all that is wrong in America, a strategy for critiquing injustices based on racial discrimination. Wayne Templeton, in an article on mystery writer Tony Hillerman, furthers this idea when he says that ethnic detective fiction often deals with two sorts of crimes: the immediate, obvious crimes (murder, usually) which is always solved at the end of the novel, and the “larger, more pervasive, injustices” (38) which are, of course, not resolved. Thus, the detectives’ main purpose, though not always deliberate, is “not solving the lesser crimes but constantly pointing out the larger ones and revealing how they continue to victimize” (39). Taken even more globally, murder can come to represent “a postcolonial metaphor for cultural genocide” (44).

Few critics, academic or otherwise, would deny that Walter Mosley’s detective fiction is among the most important examples of the genre. Some critics even go so far as to suggest Mosley is carrying on a tradition that goes back to the nineteenth century. A review in The Atlantic Monthly of Mosley’s recent mystery novel, Bad Boy Brawly Brown, for example, connects his work to the great nineteenth century tradition of social critique:
“Read together, the Rawlins books... compose a sprawling novel of manners about twentieth-century African American Los Angeles that owes as much to authors like Dickens and Zola as it does to the aesthetics of noir” (Ulin, 186). The comparison is an apt one; like Dickens and Zola, Mosley clearly uses his novels as platforms for social critique and change. Covering a period of American history from 1939 until 1965, the novels follow Easy Rawlins’s life as an African American “favors man” as he migrates from Texas to Los Angeles after fighting in WWII (Devil in a Blue Dress), becomes briefly involved in communism in the fifties (A Red Death), begins to accumulate property in his attempt at becoming part of the middle class, marries and has a child (White Butterfly), adopts two other minority children (Black Betty), faces the death of his best friend, Mouse, on the day of John F. Kennedy’s assassination in 1963 (A Little Yellow Dog), and finds himself, in Big Bad Brawly Brown, investigating the activities of a young black man involved in a black revolutionary organization. Finally, in the latest novel in the series, Little Scarlet, Mosley explores the issues surrounding the 1965 riots in Watts as Easy tracks down the murderer of Nola Payne as well as several other black women who have been having affairs with white men. Mosley has indicated in interviews that one of his goals in writing the Easy Rawlins books was to educate his audience about the history of black Americans in the twentieth century (Woertche, 117).

Influenced by the Marxist literary theorist and critic George Lukács and having studied political theory at The University of Massachusetts, Mosley is also clearly interested in exposing the “voracious maw of capitalism” (See his essay Workin’on the Chain Gang: Shaking off the Dead Hand of History [2000, 16]), a theme that shows up in most of his novels in one form or another. In Devil in a Blue Dress (1990), the first novel in the series, for instance, Easy, a recent veteran of WWII who is eager to build a new life for himself in Los Angeles, is fired for refusing to kowtow to his white boss at Champion Aircraft. Easy recognizes what is at stake financially in his refusal, but his integrity and his insistence on being treated like a man and not a boy overpower his desire for economic (middle class) stability. “A job in a factory is an awful lot like working on a plantation in the South” (62), Easy tells his readers. In A Red Death Easy is understandably attracted to the Marxist Chaim Wenzler, who schools Easy in the injustices of a capitalistic system: “We are all of us trapped, Mr. Rawlins... trapped in work. If you can’t pay the rent you die” (132). Later in the novel, Jackson Blue echoes Wenzler’s sentiments when he says to Easy:

So the banker and the corporation man gets it all, an’ the workin’man ain’t got shit. Now the workin’man have a union to say that it’s the worker makes stuff so he should be getting’the money. That’s like com’unism. But the rich man don’t like it so he gonna break the worker’s back (197).

Easy’s social and economic predicament (a result of his dealings with the white world) brings to mind yet another metaphor. I would like to suggest that in detecting the “lesser crimes,” Easy is more importantly trying to solve his own personal mystery which is who and where he wants to be in a society that does not value him, where he is invisible, or at the very least treated as a second-class citizen. His personal identity, which is constantly being negotiated, constantly being challenged, is, then, the biggest mystery of all, and cracking that mystery becomes the most intriguing aspect of the series. Mosley himself recognizes this: Easy, he says,

has taken on a tough job in the real world: he’s trying to define himself in spite of the world, to live by his own system of values. He’s trying to do what is right in an imperfect world. The genre may be mystery, but the underlying questions are moral and ethical, even existential (Mosley, “The Black Dick”, 133).
Easy’s name belies his situation since his life is anything but easy. Living in L. A., the favorite stomping grounds of the hard-boiled detective, Easy becomes a “favors man” who takes on sleuthing because he needs the money to hold onto the property he has been (somewhat unlawfully) accumulating, a necessary commodity in a capitalist society, his passport to the middle class: “I felt that I was as good as any white man, but if I didn’t even own my front door then people would look at me like just another poor beggar” (9). Ironically, it is Easy’s desire for a conventional life that plunges him into the work of a hard-boiled detective, complicating his situation because of the tension between his middle class aspirations and his attraction to the “mean streets.” Easy is also seduced by his trickster-like capacity to dart in and out of cheap bars and juke joints, making small talk to gather clues. “Nobody knew what I was up to and that made me sort of invisible; people thought that they saw me but what they really saw was an illusion of me, something that wasn’t real”, he tells us in Devil in a Blue Dress (128). Easy is a good sleuth because, as the white cops and crooked businessmen tell him, he can go places they cannot because he’s a black man; he knows the territory. In fact, Easy becomes “Mr. Rawlins,” a respectable shift in identity, when his white clientele want a favor from him. And, finally, Easy is forced into sleuthing in order to prove he is not the criminal, an accusation that repeatedly occurs not just because he’s usually found at the scene of the crime but also, of course, because he is black: “I had been seduced, hoodwinked, and blamed for a thief; I’d been bullied and looked at like a crook instead of an honest man. I could have gone home but I knew I wouldn’t be able to sleep” (45). In the latest of the series, Little Scarlet, Easy has his own part-time private practice (“Research and Delivery”) and is approached by the police because they fear an investigation by white cops in Watts immediately following the riots could set off more trouble. Easy is still characteristically reluctant to help them out, so the cops threaten to turn him in for practicing without a license. Even though “the white man’s grip on my throat was losing strength” (17), Easy finally agrees because he feels an obligation to help his people, in this case, black women.

His smooth shifts from street dialect to standard English to suit the situation and the ease with which he can supply phoney names for himself and for others further indicate his negotiating identities, a strategy which in this case produces positive results because it helps him solve the crimes. But these shifts also produce problems for Easy. His use of white English for example, is, according to Theodore O. Mason, a subversive act, as is Easy’s desire for property: “Both acts move one into the realm of transgression, the zone of dangerous instability” (179). Daphne Monet, the “devil in a blue dress” whom Easy has been hired to find, is his perfect trickster double in this respect, which is one reason they are attracted to one another:

Daphne was like the chameleon lizard. She changed for her man. If he was a mild white man who was afraid to complain to the waiter she’d pull his head to her bosom and pat him. If he was a poor black man who had soaked up pain and rage for a lifetime she washed his wounds with a rough rag and licked the blood till it staunched. (183)

Even more dramatic, her hair color, her eye color, and her language change throughout the novel, and eventually Easy discovers she’s not French at all but a light-skinned black woman named Ruby. Although Easy’s physical appearance does not change as dramatically, his language and manners do: he readily admits to shifting from standard English to street dialect when it helps him uncover crucial information and “exploits his Southern roots and manners to gain information” (Gruesser, 243). So just as Daphne tries
to “pass” for a white woman, Easy does his share of passing in order to carry out the job of sleuth.

8 Unfortunately, as John Gruesser points out in his analysis of Easy as a signifying detective, Easy’s trickster self often alienates him from his own black community: “juggling linguistic and social codes to deceive both white and black characters” (Ibid., 235), intensifying his deceptive personality. In other words, Easy is invisible in both the black and white worlds. As Mouse, Easy’s evil best friend, says to him, “You just like Ruby.... She look like she white and you think like you white. But brother you don’t know that you both poor niggers” (Mosley, 1990, 205).

9 In *A Red Death* Easy’s identity is further complicated when, after being caught for tax evasion, he makes a deal with the FBI to spy on an alleged communist union organizer, Chaim Wenzler, a Polish American Jew who is working at the First African Baptist Church. Like his fictional cousins, Richard Wright’s Bigger Thomas and Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man, Easy finds himself seduced by communism’s appeal to the working class and by the parallels Wenzler draws between Jews and American blacks, both economically and socially, particularly when Wenzler reveals to Easy that his own brother had been hanged by the Nazis. This, of course, reminds Easy of his own people’s bloody history:

> I’d seen lynchings and burnings, shootings and stonings. I’d seen a man, Jessup Howard, hung for looking at a white woman. And I’d seen two brothers who were lynched from two nooses on the same rope because they complained about the higher prices they were charged at the county store. (Mosley, 1991, 136)

10 Easy makes a further connection when he discovers the body of Poinsettia Jackson “hanging from the light fixture in the middle of the ceiling. She was naked and her skin sagged so that it seemed as if it would come right off the bone any second” (63-64). When he eventually figures out that Poinsettia was murdered for not paying her rent, he realizes just how right Wenzler has been in connecting capitalism with oppression. More importantly, he realizes, towards the end of the novel, when someone takes a shot at him, that all he has suffered personally is perhaps because he “wasn’t, and hadn’t been, my own man” (203).

11 Easy’s shifting of identities becomes especially problematic when it spills over into his personal life. This is most apparent in Mosley’s third novel, *White Butterfly*. Now married and the biological father of Edna and the foster father of Jesus, a Mexican American boy whom he has rescued in from child prostitution, Easy appears to want to settle down and be a family man. But his shifting identity and attraction to invisibility seem to preclude this desire. Never a clear hero, Easy drinks too much, cheats on his wife with his best friends’ partners, including Mouse’s ex-wife, Etta, and finds it nearly impossible to be honest with his wife about his finances. After he has become a legitimate property owner by working as a sleuth and saving money from various jobs, he still refuses to tell Regina where his money is coming from, and this, unfortunately, leads to the dissolution of his marriage and the loss of his biological daughter, Edna Regina, understandably, simply cannot tolerate his unwillingness to be open and honest with her. Easy knows he is wrong to hide the source of his income from Regina because it prevents them from having an intimate relationship and makes him feel lonely. Just after Regina hangs up on him, he thinks: “When I cradled the phone I felt very lonely. All of what I had and all I had done was had and done in secret. Nobody knew the real me” (Mosley, 1992, 179). Some critics have suggested that perhaps the reason Easy is so secretive is that Mosley is caught in the hard-boiled tradition where the sleuth must necessarily be a loner, must be secretive. But
later, in *A Little Yellow Dog*, Easy offers us an explanation for his secrecy when he blames his cultural background: “Where I came from you kept everything a secret-survival depended on keeping the people around you in the dark” (200).

The most mysterious and troubling aspect of Easy’s multiple identities, however, both for the reader and for Easy, is his capacity for violence. Although living in Watts as an African American male is reason enough to explain this, there is still within him a potential for evil that cannot be blamed on outside sources. As Mosley himself has said in an interview about Easy, “It’s not only outside oppression from the world but inside he is really held back” (Silet 13). Mosley has also said that he didn’t want Easy to be a hero: “I hate setting up heroes that we can’t really live by. You know, real people make mistakes, have flaws, do the wrong thing...” (14), but, in fact, there often is not much dividing Easy from the criminals he is investigating. It is no mistake that his best friend is Mouse, whom Easy describes as “the darkness on the other side of the moon” (Mosley 1994, 77), a man who shoots first and doesn’t bother to ask questions, a man who kills his stepfather over money and probably has killed his real father as well (see *Gone Fishin’*). He is Easy’s shadow side, someone Easy could easily turn into and nearly does in *A Little Yellow Dog*.

Mosley, in several interviews, has defended Easy’s behavior, noting that “ignorance and violence, sex and criminality are deeply etched in Hispanic and African hues” (“The Black Dick” 132). That may well be true, but, as Roger Berger has noted, such behavior does not subvert the stereotype of black male sexuality; it exemplifies it. Thus, though we may understand where Easy’s “relentless misogyny” (Berger, 288) comes from, his behavior nonetheless severely undercuts our admiration of him. As one reader told Mosley: “I read your first book and I’m going to read the next, too, because I want to figure out why Easy’s such a jerk!” (Silet, 16).

There are numerous examples of Easy’s capacity for violence. The most troubling one is the scene in *White Butterfly* when Easy and his wife, Regina, have sex just after she has confronted him about where all his money is coming from. Although the description of their lovemaking is admittedly ambiguous — “She gave in to my caresses but she wouldn’t kiss me. I rolled up on top of her and held her head between my hands. She let my leg slip between hers but when I put my lips to hers she wouldn’t open her mouth or her eyes. My tongue pushed at her teeth but that was as far as I got (Mosley 32)— both Regina’s labeling of it later as rape and Easy’s own association of it through a dream with one of the rape/murders he is investigating point to a violent and dark element in Easy that is, to say the least, unsettling:

Regina was leaning up against the tree with both hands. Her skirt was hiked up above her buttocks and a large naked man was taking her from behind. Her head whipped from side to side and she had a powerful orgasm but making the same kind of strange noises that Bonita Edwards made (34).

However, Easy’s violent side is temporarily put on a shelf in the fourth novel, *Black Betty*, when he is seriously wounded and finally forced to get off the streets and come to terms with his messy life. Having moved out of Watts into a better neighborhood with Jesus and Feather, the mulatta daughter of Cyndi Starr, the White Butterfly whose death he had been investigating in the previous novel (her mother had been killed by her own grandfather for bearing a black child), Easy appears to have settled into a more stable life. This is echoed in the parallel historical event mentioned in the novel, the election of Kennedy as President, and the references to Martin Luther King, Jr. In other words, Easy’s situation, like the nation’s, seems to be on the upswing. Furthermore, as the foster parent of multiracial children, Easy also points to the possibility that racial lines are breaking
down in America. Moreover, his reading of *Huckleberry Finn* suggests a kind of negotiating yet comfortable status, for he finds no difficulty in identifying with both Huck and Jim: "I could have been either one of them" (13), he tells the reader. As more and more blacks are buying property, Easy even attempts to build a black shopping mall, Freedom's Plaza, hoping to break through the color line in commercialism. But his plans are thwarted by the white city bureaucrats who want his property for a sewage plant (71).

In *A Little Yellow Dog*, Easy loses his taste for real estate deals. We find him, instead, the head custodian at the Sojourner Truth Junior High School, working with an Italian Chinese secretary and a blonde Negro from Iowa and giving orders to whites. However, his tenuous self-identity once more manifests itself in violence and secrecy as he comes dangerously close to exchanging roles with Mouse, who is now out of jail and trying to lead a crime-free life. "Somewhere on the lineup I had become invisible again. I'd taken on the shadows that kept me camouflaged, and dangerous" (Mosley, 1996, 156). As William Nash has pointed out in his article, "Maybe I Killed My Own Blood: Doppelgängers and the Death of Double Consciousness in Walter Mosley's *A Little Yellow Dog*, "Easy begins his movement back towards the streets as Mouse self-domesticates by taking a job as a night watchman at the school where Easy has been working as head janitor and by giving up the street life" (304). In a passage that strongly suggests that Easy and Mouse have exchanged roles, Mouse tells Easy: "but right now I just wanna see what it's like to live wit'your family an'work at a job.... I'm lookin'for a new way –that's all" (257).

Ironically, it is Mouse who identifies Easy's existential problem: "a nigger ain't never gonna be happy 'less he accept what he is" (Mosley, 1990, 205). But, of course, the question for Easy, the same question Ellison's famous narrator faced, is "Who am I?" Or, more importantly, "Who do I want to be: the tough, hardboiled, streetwise invisible undercover sleuth or a loving, responsible, and hard-working father?" As he is coming out of one of the clubs he has so loved haunting, Easy thinks: "I wondered if there was a place for me that could be like this and still allow me to hear the children's laughter in the morning" (186). Trying hard to be like his namesake, Ezekiel, the Hebrew prophet who called for the Jews exiled in Babylon to return to godliness and faith, Easy's quest for a place in the world has, nonetheless, been arduous and uncertain. The little yellow dog reminds him of his capacity to slip over the edge: "As the days passed I began to accept him as part of my life; the dark, dangerous part that always threatened. As long as Pharaoh was around snarling and cursing I'd remember the kind of trouble that a man like me could find" (307).

With the presumed death of Mouse at the end of *A Little Yellow Dog*, Easy could well be on his way to a new life and a solution to his personal mystery. In the second to last book of the series, *Bad Boy Brawly Brown* (2002), which takes place in 1964 during the Viet Nam War with America on the brink of the civil rights movement, we see an Easy who has in many ways grown up. Now 44, and still the head janitor at Sojourner Truth Junior High School, he has given up smoking and drinking and seems to have settled down with Bonnie, the flight attendant whom he rescues at the end of *A Little Yellow Dog*, and his two adopted children, Feather and Jesus. Although he still is attracted to other women, Easy rebuffs their sexual advances because "in maturity our minds are sometimes able to short-circuit those impulses" (291). Indeed, he does seem to have a more mature view of relationships between men and women: "I never talked to my first wife. Back then I thought that a man was supposed to be strong and silent" (56). We learn that his increasingly strong commitment to his family comes from his father, who, before he
deserted the family when Easy was eight, had taught him that “a real man will know that he has to overcome anything that gets in the way of him caring for his family” (149). As in the previous novels in the series, his personal and professional progress parallels that of his own people. “It had only been in the past few years that I could talk back without fear of losing my job, or maybe even a tooth or two” (142). He thus stands up to the white principal at the junior high school when he is chastized for missing work and even orders his workers to put back furniture that the principal had ordered moved (139). He also feels an increasingly strong sense of social responsibility for his people: “I was the man in charge of burials. I was the gravedigger for all the dead black men and women” (126). In short, he seems to have come a long way in his quest for personal identity.

But he hasn’t completed his quest for personal self; in some ways, the old Easy remains. He is still, of course, attracted to the mean streets: “If I were living the life that I had promised myself,” he tells the reader, “I would have gone home and tucked the kids into their beds” (95). Like Odysseus, who he resembles in many ways, he continues to lie, indeed it “feels good to be lying again” (284) and to play the trickster, believing that he must to survive. In fact, he compares himself to Isaac Newton, “a man living in shadows in almost every part of his life. A man who keeps secrets and harbors passions that could get him killed if he let them out into the world” (266). He also recognizes that his background as a poor black man in “the streets and back alleys” has cultivated in him a knowledge of the human psyche that “most cops would give their eyeteeth to understand” (213). In a discussion with Bonnie about his search for Brawly, the connection between his sleuthing and his personal quest becomes especially clear. He tells Bonnie that if he can just find “the old Easy,” he’ll be able to crack the case. But Bonnie knows that for Easy the most important mystery is not where Brawly is but where Easy is. “what you should be doing is finding yourself, not this boy” (204), she tells Easy. Of course, that’s what Easy has been unconsciously trying to do all his life.

Perhaps the strongest indication that Easy still struggles with his identity is his obsession with Mouse’s death and his guilt feelings. There are many hints in the book that Mouse might still be alive, a possible indication that Easy himself doesn’t want to let go of his shadow self. In other words, as long as Mouse exists, in Easy’s mind or in reality, Easy will never completely relinquish his life on the “mean streets.” The connection between Easy and his creator seems relevant here. As Roger Berger has so astutely argued, Mosley himself seems ambivalent about his identity as a writer. In “‘The Black Dick’: Race, Sexuality, and Discourse in the L. A. Novels of Walter Mosley,” Berger asks whether Mosley’s novels are “authentically transgressive tests, or... discursively subsumed under the detective story formula” (281). That is, Berger sees the novels as “metacritical allegories that reflect a fundamental ambivalence about his own intervention into white (detective discourse)” (281) and notes an “unresolved (and, perhaps, unresolvable) tension between Mosley, the African American detective writer, and Mosley, the American hardboiled detective novelist” (286). Thus, says Berger, “Mosley’s division of his detective into two is symptomatic of his own ambivalent feelings about the genre” (292).

In the last of the Easy Rawlins detective novels so far, Little Scarlet, many of Easy’s ambivalent feelings seem to be resolved. Now 45 and living in “peaceful West L. A.” (5) with his girl friend Bonnie and his two adopted children Feather and Jesus, Easy has settled into his head janitor’s job at Sojourner Truth Junior High School, with part-time real estate and sleuthing ventures. Although he is still hounded by the police from time to time (despite the letter he carries with him as a kind of badge proving he is working for
the cops), he now more readily stands up to white authority because, particularly after
the riots, he realizes, that “I was tired of policemen stopping me just for walking down
the street” (43). As Janet Maslin suggests in her review of Little Scarlet, “the burning of
Watts becomes a direct manifestation of Easy’s long suppressed, no longer tamped-down
anger” (1).

21 Significantly, the riots and his overt anger seem to engender in Easy a political leaning we
have rarely seen before as he realizes that “almost every black man, woman, and child
you meet feels that anger” and that “this riot was sayin’it out loud for the first time”
(78). Easy still slips in and out of street dialect to gain information, still gives phony
names and wears clothes that help him blend into a crowd, even going so far as to
disguise himself as a homeless man in order to find Harold, the bum he suspects of
murdering all the black women. And he still feels invisible to whites.

22 But like America in the mid-1960’s, Easy has changed. For one thing, his understanding of
both himself and his people is much deeper. “I began to see that my history with white
people was much more complex than I had thought it was. On the one hand Margie had
ignored my existence, and on the other I scared her to death” (122). Just as Mouse, his
doppelganger, and Jackson Blue are trying to lead respectable lives and hold down
legitimate jobs, Easy thinks perhaps he, too, has to “let go of the order of things that I had
always known” (172). One indication of this change in the order of things is the scene in
the sanitarium where Easy goes to talk to the aunt of Nola Payne, the murdered woman,
the “Little Scarlet” of the book’s title. When he accidentally touches one of the white
nurses who has information that could lead to the killer of Nola as well as the other
murdered black women, Easy feels as though some “taboo that had governed her people
and mine for hundreds of years” had been broken (35).

23 Moreover, when he discovers that Jocelyn Ostenberg, Harold’s mother, has been passing
as a white woman, down to her powdered face and all-white living room, and passing
Harold off as her maid’s son, Easy’s reaction illustrates his growing ability to understand
the roots of self-loathing and the dynamics of racism:

I didn’t hate her for hating herself. If everybody in the world despises and hates
you, sees your features as ugly and simian, makes jokes about your ways of talking,
calls you stupid and beneath contempt; if you have no history, no heroes, and no
future where a hero might lead, then you might begin to hate yourself, your face
and features, your parents, and even your child (255-56).

24 That the Watts riots represent a kind of rite of passage, an Odyssean journey to the
Underworld, is underscored when Easy visits Mama Jo after the “wrong Harold” (222)
beats him up. As a kind of Circe figure, “a woman of great power and knowledge: a witch
by anyone’s definition at any time in the history of mankind” (224), Mama Jo heals Easy
with her magic elixir and then sends him on his way, feeling “like I could go out and run a
ten-mile race” (227). More importantly, he thinks maybe his “mind somehow had been
altered to leave behind all of my history, clear my eyes, a man cut loose from his own
private anchor of hate” (238). Thus, as Watts is restored to order and the neighborhood
cools down, so does Easy’s anger abate.

25 But not his determination to keep on fighting for his own dignity and the dignity and
respect he believes his people deserve. Not only does he save the day by finally
convincing the white cops of Harold’s guilt; he now insists that Suggs, the good white cop,
have more respect for him and for black women. As he says to Suggs, “I don’t like bein’
called ‘boy’... and I don’t like our Negro women to be called girls” (239). In an almost
comical moment that hints at better things to come between blacks and white, he even manages to get Suggs to bring him coffee and doughnuts.

26 At the end of the novel Easy is a hero in many respects beyond merely solving the crime. He rescues Benita Flag, Mouse’s girlfriend, from a suicide attempt, helps the Steinmans relocate to a new shoe shop, for which he’s given “ancient riding gear” (273), aids Jackson Blue in getting a well-paid, respectable job, and sends Juanda, a young woman whose sexual advances he has successfully rebuffed, off to college with money Mouse has given him.

27 But we probably haven’t heard the last of Easy Rawlins. Now that he has a legitimate license to practice sleuthing, thanks to the L. A. Police Department, Easy most likely will continue his adventures. Like Odysseus, who according to Tennyson was not content at Penelope’s side but planned “to sail beyond the sunset, and the baths/Of all the western stars, until I die” (612), Easy probably won’t be content with settling down, just as his creator, Walter Mosley, shows every sign of a kind of artistic restlessness, an unwillingness to be labeled. Not only has he admitted he doesn’t want to be pigeon-holed as a writer of hard-boiled novels; he doesn’t want to be pigeonholed as any kind of writer.

In addition to the now eight Easy Rawlins detective novels, Mosley has written one science fiction novel, Blue Light (1998), a novel based on the life of blues guitarist Robert Johnson called R.L.’s Dream (1995), two novels featuring Socrates Fortlow, ex-con and grass roots social activist in Always Outnumbered, Always Outgunned (1998) and Walkin’ the Dog (1999); Fearless Jones (2001), featuring a new detective, a slim volume of social history, Workin’ on the Chain Gang (2001) and numerous short stories. He has also had a play, Since You Been Gone, produced in workshop by the Hartford (Connecticut) Stage Company. “It’s important,” Mosley says, “for black men and women, especially black men, to write in all genres.... We need popular fiction that can say important things you want your children and your people to read ” (McKanic, 19).

28 Identity, then, for both Easy and Mosley remains a continuous process, not a fixed site, contingent on all the elements that both include them and exclude them. It is a complex entity, if, in fact, it can ever be called an entity. Writing about identity in a postmodern world, Stuart Hall, in his introduction to Questions of Cultural Identity, says this:

The concept of identity... is not an essentialist, but a strategic and positional one. That is to say, directly contrary to what appears to be its settled semantic career, this concept of identity does not signal that stable core of the self, unfolding from beginning to end through all the vicissitudes of history without change, the bit of the self which remains always-already “the same,” identical to itself across time. Nor-if we translate this essentializing conception to the stage of cultural identity is it that “collective or true self hiding inside the many other, more superficial or artificially imposed ‘selves’ which a people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common”e... and which can stabilize, fix or guarantee an unchanging “oneness” or cultural belongingness underlying all the other superficial differences. (Hall, 1996, 3-4)

29 Such a position, however, can only be advantageous because, as Hall has said in another context, the tension resulting from the negotiation of multiple identities enriches debate since “it holds theoretical and political questions in an ever irresolvable but permanent tension. It constantly allows the one to irritate, bother, and disturb the other, without insisting on some final theoretical closure” (2001, 1907). So although the overt mysteries in Mosley’s novels are always solved, his protagonist’s personal mystery, his identity, remains elusive, shifting, and tenuous. And Mosley himself remains elusive. Perhaps his
status as the son of an African American Southern born father and a Jewish mother from New York may have something to do with his interest in identity politics as well as his desire not to be fixed as one kind of writer or another, one kind of human being or another. But certainly both Easy’s and Mosley’s elusiveness are precisely why they engage us as they do.

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Mosley’s Easy Rawlins series follows the hard-boiled tradition but also shares with much ethnic fiction strategies for exposing social and economic disparities in the U. S. Crime thus becomes a metaphor for all that is wrong in America, a vehicle for critiquing injustice based on racial discrimination.

Moreover, Mosley’s reluctant sleuth is also engaged in a more important mystery: who he is and where he wants to be in a society that does not value him, a society that makes black men invisible second class citizens. Easy’s personal identity, constantly negotiated and challenged, is the biggest mystery of all, and cracking that mystery becomes the most intriguing aspect of the series. As Roger Berger has argued, Mosley himself is highly ambivalent about his identity as a writer of hard-boiled fiction.
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Of Race and the Witch Hunt in Walter Mosley’s *A Red Death*

Daniel Peltzman

1 If one chooses not to include *Gone Fishin’* in the series, Easy’s literary life, from *Devil in a Blue Dress* (1990) to *Little Scarlet* (the latest issue published in 2004), covers about two decades from the post World War II years to the aftermath of the 1965 riots, a period when the nation was making crucial political choices. *Black Betty* and *A Little Yellow Dog* do mention John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King, but *A Red Death* is arguably the most “political” of all, with its picture of Cold War obsessions, the fear of Communist infiltration and of unpatriotic persuasions, that serve as a background for home-made treason and guilt, and infect the relationship between characters of different ethnic origins.

2 Easy once again needs to find his way out of a situation beyond his control, although (as a trickster caught at his own game) of his own making through his fiscal dishonesty. Easy’s treachery, especially his awareness of it, “I made like I was friends with people and then I planned to do them dirt” (276),1 fictionizes the negative facets of social mechanics in a racist society. This essay therefore sets out to study the representation of the witch hunt’s impact on minority characters. Secondly, keeping in mind the interference between history and fiction, we will see that Mosley’s characters are not part of the militancy that was soon to develop in the country: the novel does not bear testimony to the then gathering impetus of the civil rights campaign.

3 Unsatisfied as they are with their lives, these people are –mostly– politically apathetic.

4 The novel is set in 1953 in Los Angeles. Easy Rawlins, a Second World War veteran earns his living by “doing services” around town. He also earns an income from the apartments he purchased with the shady payoff he garnered at the close of *Devil in a Blue Dress*. He actually employs Mofass for a front man in this business. Mofass collects the rents, does the dirty work (such as evicting insolvent tenants) while Easy poses as the janitor, because he has failed to declare his ownership to the IRS. Rawlins is summoned by tax inspector Reginald Lawrence, whose aggressive and racist attitude puts our hero in a delicate situation. The only way for him to avoid prison is to agree to become a spy for
the FBI: agent Darryl Craxton who is hunting for information on Wenzler, needs his services. Wenzler is a Communist activist and unionist formerly employed in an aeronautical plant, but now involved in collecting used clothing that is resold to benefit the charities run by an African-American church. Against his will Rawlins accepts the FBI's deal and forms a friendship with Wenzler.

The detective element of the novel comes into play when Rawlins discovers the body of Poinsettia Jackson, one of his tenants on the point of being evicted, and who has apparently committed suicide. Following the investigation, the police conclude to a murder and suspect Rawlins. Two further murders are committed in the church itself and Rawlins is again among the first witnesses to find the body of Reverend Towne and a woman called Tania Lee. Held under arrest this time, Rawlins is eventually freed thanks to the intervention of Agent Craxton, now more eager than ever to use him to obtain information on Wenzler. With some regret Rawlins gets closer to the Communist activist and makes the acquaintance of his daughter Shirley. When Wenzler is in turn murdered, Rawlins realizes that Mofass and Lawrence have been pulling the strings to do him in. He exposes the assassin, none other than the tax inspector, and when the latter is on the point of killing him, he is rescued by Mouse, a childhood friend and the husband of Etta Mae, his school sweetheart, with whom he envisages starting a new life. At the end of the novel the hero is home safe and dry but is now alone. So he asks Mofass to remain his friend.

The above synopsis shows that treason (here engineered by government officials) occupies a predominant place. Mosley pictures the steps of a reluctant spy at a time when hundreds of witnesses, willing or not, were becoming informers—or, seen from the other side, “government witnesses”. In order to exculpate themselves by proving their loyalty to God and country, they denounced colleagues or friends. However, in the vast majority of cases witnesses were forced to testify in order to save their careers or to avoid prison. An official summons could spell instant personal ruin (Navasky, 6-45).

In the novel the summons before the tax inspector produces the same effect. Rawlins knows he is on the verge of serious problems with the law. He shows his awareness that he has been denounced to the tax office when he says to one of his friends, a bar tender, “Some people been talking ‘bout them buildin’s I bought a while back” (51). Thus, he has no choice but to collaborate with the FBI. When he meets Chaim Wenzler he realizes that he has been caught in a trap which fills him with disgust: “And I was afraid of what I might do to save myself from jail” (144). He is no longer a free agent. He must obey the two government officials who have now become his masters (one must note the racial overtone): “Craxton and Lawrence had me so worried about my money and my freedom that I had become their slave. At least Mouse and Chaim acted from their natures. They were the innocent ones while I was the villain” (148). This loss of identity constantly haunts him, making him feel abject. He knows, however, that his well-being can only come from the betrayal that will bring about the fall of his friend, even if later he longs for a solution that would enable him to avoid prison whilst at the same time helping Wenzler escape the clutches of the FBI. When he is finally led to reflect on this tragedy, he sees that his role as a spy and his indirect responsibility in the murders will haunt him for the rest of his life: “Chaim was my friend and he was dead. Poinsettia was my tenant and she was dead too. One way or another both deaths were my fault. Even if it was only because of me not telling the truth or no having compassion when I could have” (235).
In this frame of mind, his request that Mofass continue as his employee (and friend!) helps indict a society where, against reason and feeling, people must build bonds that deny the existence of trust, or even racial solidarity.

To a certain extent, Mosley echoes Dalton Trumbo, the novelist and screenwriter who was blacklisted from 1947 to 1960. Towards the end of his life Trumbo received the Laurel Awards for a Lifetime’s Achievement. During the ceremony he gave a speech in which he recalled this period of inquisition and fear, referring more particularly to the blacklists:

The blacklist was a time of evil, and no one on either side who survived it came through untouched by evil. Caught in a situation that had passed beyond the control of mere individuals, each person reacted as his nature, his needs, his convictions, and his particular circumstances compelled him to [...] It will do no good to search for villains or heroes because there were none; there were only victims. Some suffered less than others, some grew and some diminished, but in the final tally we were all victims because almost without exception each of us felt compelled to say things he did not want to say, to do things he did not want to do, to deliver and receive wounds he truly did not want to exchange (Trumbo, 569-70).

Mosley depicts a similar situation: when all is said and done, Rawlins clearly sees he has been dragged into a process beyond his control and which makes him all the more a victim as he is conscious of the hurts he has inflicted. In the same way as Trumbo did with the Hollywood community, he forgives Mofass for his betrayal.

Contrary to what one might expect, A Red Death is silent on the long history of difficult relations between African-Americans and Jews, the Jewish ghetto landlord or shopkeeper versus the black tenant or customer. Whereas one could expect the novel to show difficult relations between African-Americans and Jews, there is nothing such here. The deep friendship between Rawlins and Wenzler is based on their past experiences in their respective countries. Wenzler is a prototypical Communist American Jew who is ardently involved in political activism, devoid of any form of racism and for whom the Communist party remains the only hope against war and intolerance. However, Mosley does not describe a Jewish American who has been established on American soil for some time. Wenzler is originally from Vilne in Poland and joined the Communist resistance after the Nazi invasion. Betrayed by the terrified members of the Jewish community, he decided to fight for the Soviet side, “the soldiers of the people,” even if the Red Army stood by as the Warsaw ghetto was fighting to the bitter end (143).

From their first meeting onwards, Rawlins cannot prevent the friendship with Wenzler from forming whilst he knows he must betray him in spite of the ethnic histories that haunt both their lives: pogroms and Nazi persecution for Wenzler, American racial violence for Rawlins.

Wenzler is the first to articulate the existential bond between them. He is committed to continuing the fight against injustice: “And that’s why I’m here,” Wenzler said. “Because Negroes in America have the same life as the Jew in Poland. Ridicule, segregated. We were hung and burned just for being alive” (110-111). In his eyes the Communist party constitutes the only defense against anti-Semitism and racism. Although he participated in the liberation of Camp Dachau, Rawlins, needs more time to sense his way to the community of feeling with Wenzler. It is these common tragic experiences which have made them both atheists. Each for his own yet similar reasons, they have rejected God or rather God has rejected them. For Wenzler this results from the torment of war, and for Rawlins from his father’s deserting his family. The hero, because of his friendship with
Wenzler, cannot erase the Holocaust from his mind. Asked by the church elders to
destroy a red-ant nest, he uses poison and observes its effects on the insects:

I saw no more than four of them actually die, but I knew that the hives were full of
the dead. I knew that they had fallen where they stood, because the poison is very
deadly in close quarters. Like in Dachau when we got there, the dead strewn like
chips of wood at a lumberyard. (150)

This terrible memory of the war brings him to confront his role as an informer. The
horrors of the Holocaust and his childhood steeped in a climate of racism reminds him
that he must betray his friend whose days may have just as well ended in Dachau.

This past which links the two men is constantly evoked until the end of the novel. When
Rawlins unmasks Lawrence as the assassin and asks him for the reasons which pushed
him to commit these crimes, his only reply is, “Niggers and Jews” (272). In this way, even
after Wenzler’s death, Rawlins and Wenzler remain inseparable. The two men personify
two communities, unfortunately made to submit to a hatred that leads to murder.

The political aspects of the novel take into account the ambiguous relationship of the
Communist party with the African-American community. The Communist party was
without a doubt one of the rare political movements that sought to improve the lives of
African-Americans. In 1931, several members of the African-American community joined
its ranks to acknowledge the party’s effort in supporting the nine African-Americans
accused of rape in Scottsboro (Carter, 167-169). During the Depression, the Communist
party perpetuated an image of a Soviet Union in which there existed no form of racism.
Soviet society then became the model to follow to achieve the same results in the United
States. During the fifties the members of the Party fought to abolish segregation and
discrimination that was raging all over the country, North, South and West. Nevertheless,
it is necessary to put into perspective the influence of the Communist party on the whole
of the African-American community. It never attracted a great number of African-
American followers with the exception of certain intellectuals (Schrecker 32-33). This
paradox is omnipresent in Mosley’s novel where many reasons that could account for the
party’s lack of success are given. Most of the time it is Rawlins who brings to light the
political context and the repercussions this has on the plot. Allusions to anti-Communism
can be seen from the third chapter onwards, when Rawlins brings up the political
contradictions and simplifications that mixed traditional American isolationism and Cold
War propaganda with racial consciousness:

Back then we thought we knew who the enemy was. He was a white man with a
foreign accent and a hatred for freedom. In the war it was Hitler and his Nazis; after
that it was Comrade Stalin and the communists; later on, Mao Tse-Tung and the
Chinese took on an honorary white status. All of them bad men with evil designs on
the free world. (24-25)

Contrary to Easy’s later posture as a disillusioned realist, his early political self is
confused and removed from militancy. Distorted political views, such as hammered in by
the system at large, are further illustrated, rather caustically, in the same chapter when
LaMarque, Mouse and Etta Mae’s son, is watching television at Rawlins’s. He learns of the
arrest of one Charles Winters, charged with stealing classified documents from his
government office. The boy then asks Rawlins questions that catch him off guard. After
first trying to evade the question, he replies by emphasizing his disinterest for politics in
general and ultimately comes up with a reply fully attuned to the anti-Communist
propaganda of the period:
“What's a comanisk, Unca Easy?”
“What, you think that just'cause this is my TV that I should know everything it says?”
“Uh-huh,” he nodded. LaMarque was a treasure.
“There’s all kinda communists, LaMarque.”
“There’s one there,” he said pointing at the television. But the picture of Mr. Winters was gone. Instead there was a picture of Ike in the middle of a golf swing.
“That kind is a man who thinks he can make things better by tearin’ down what we got here in America and buildin’it up like what they got in Russia.”
LaMarque opened his eyes and his mouth as far as he could.
“You mean they wanna tear down Momma house and Momma TV up here in America?”
“The kinda world he wants, nobody owns anything. It’s like this here TV would be for everybody.
“Uh-huh!”
LaMarque jumped out, balling his little fists.
“LaMarque!” Etta shouted. “What’s got into you?”
“Comanisk gonna take our TV!” (33-34).

Such a representation of the effects of anti-Communist propaganda taking hold of a child’s mind does more than simply denouncing the nation’s foreign policy paranoia. As the novel has it, propaganda wormed its way into the black community’s world view. When Reverend Towne (though not obviously a Communist sympathizer) declares in a sermon that it was “Satan that led [the U. S.] in war against the Koreans and the Chinese” (92-93) and provoked the deaths of many young men, his flock demur. Even Etta is made uneasy by Reverend Towne’s stand:

Everywhere people were grumbling.
“What do he mean? What can I do?”
“A minister ain’t no politician, that’s illegal.”
“We cain’t hep it.”
“Communists are against God. We gotta fight’em.”
Etta turned to me and took hold of my hand. She said, “Take me home, Easy.” (93)

When Agent Craxton informs Rawlins of his mission, the latter no longer fully understands the international positions of his country. The Soviets, once allies of the United States, have become their worst enemy. Above all, he cannot understand how political commitment can lead to a person’s ruin. He is baffled, thinking of Paul Robeson whose career was shattered after his pro-Communist statement (Bentley, 770-789), by the sacrifices political openness entails: "I didn’t know how we could be friends with somebody one day and then enemies the next. I didn’t know why a man like Robeson would give up his shining career for something like politics" (62). But he is not yet openly critical. Like Etta and their fellow parishioners, he is part of a politically naïve and easily misled black community; and his skepticism towards Agent Craxton’s lecture on the dangers of Communism mostly stems from his lack of interest in the matter.

Rawlins’s disinterest for politics is further illustrated when he hears of W.E.B. DuBois for the first time. Easy’s ignorance (he has heard of Marcus Garvey but not of DuBois although he attends night school at City College [214]) once again highlights the effects of anti-Communism. This lack of knowledge is not, however, very surprising. Just as with Robeson, Mosley sends the reader back into the inquisitorial atmosphere of the time. From the end of the forties on, DuBois was subjected to numerous attacks for his stand in favor of the American Communist Party. He was even excluded from the NAACP among whose founding members he had been at the beginning of the century. Easy’s
unawareness of DuBois’s paramount role as a defender of black rights reads as one more evidence of anti-Communism, as well as of the will to erase black history and resilience:

“Who?”
“DuBois. He’s a famous Negro, Easy. Almost a hundred years old. He’s always been writin’bout gettin’at’Africa. You prob’ly ain’t never heard of him’cause he’s a com’unist. They don’t teach ya’bout com’unists.”
“So how do you know, if they don’t teach it?”
“Li’ary got its do’ open, man. Ain’t nobody tellin’ you not to go.” (216).

Although Easy has heard of Garvey, the latter’s image once again brings the characters’ political apathy out. To Easy, Garvey is essentially the proponent of the Return to Africa movement. Easy finds this idea mildly appealing (for others) because it means the possible emergence of a society run by and entirely composed of blacks. This dream of one’s own place, of fairness and equality does not leave Rawlins insensible. During a meeting organized by a movement called “African Migration Blue”, Sonja Achebe, the orator, speaks eloquently about the return to Africa. Rawlins listens closely with admiration, “The speaker was talking about home, Africa. A place where everybody looked like the people in that room. A place where kings and presidents were black. I was moved to hear her” (217). Nevertheless, the shadow of violence and police repression spoil the session. Easy has reasons to believe the movement may be involved in the murders he is suspected of and, after Achebe has admitted to being under FBI surveillance, Easy’s insistent questions bring a bodyguard who punches him hard.

Where do the characters stand with respect to the witch hunt? Such is the last question we will bring up through the character of Jackson Blue. Jackson is a small-time thief and informer for the local African-American underworld. Surprisingly, Jackson is a militant who demonstrates an unbelievable erudition in a number of domains, which attracts Rawlins’s admiration in spite of his awareness of Jackson’s big fault: his being ready to betray anyone for a modest sum. Thus, the character who stands out as a militant intellectual is equally an informer. It is from him that Rawlins tries to gather his information and to better understand the anti-Communist atmosphere into which he has been submerged, in spite of himself. Jackson Blue then reveals the existence of the blacklists and their victims who, for the most part, are white actors, writers or scientists. He is sure that neither his name nor that of Rawlins will ever appear on a blacklist, not for political reasons, but for a question of skin color:

“Yo’ name ain’t on that list, Easy. My name ain’t neither. You know why?” I shook my head.
“They don’t need yo’ name to know you black, Easy. All they gotta do is look at you an’t’hey know that.”
“So what Jackson?” I didn’t understand and I was so drunk and high that it made me almost in a rage.
“One day they gonna th’ow that list out, man. They gonna need some movie star or some new bomb an’t’hey gonna th’ow that list away. Mosta these guys gonna have work again,” he said, then he winked at me. “But you still gonna be a black niggah, Easy. An’ niggah ain’t got no union he could count on, an’ niggah ain’t got no politician gonna work fo’ him. All he got is a do’ step t’ shit in and a black hand t’wipe his black ass.” (230)

To believe sarcastic Jackson Blue, neither Communism nor anti-Communism will change anything to African-American life. Blacks must face up to their situation without any hope of the least support from the whites. In this, Jackson Blue echoes W. E. B. DuBois’s
bitter statement, “In my own country for nearly a century I have been nothing but a nigger” (Walker, 77).

Mosley’s story suggests the witch hunt is one more political pageant passing black people by. The politics of A Red Death are steeped in racial pessimism. Black militant movements such as the African Migration Blue (possibly “Communists” in the either/or logic of the cold war) have no real voice, at least not one Easy is ready to hear. In spite of his sympathy for their message, he insists he already has a home. Though it is “in enemy lands” (221), this is where the struggle is: a struggle for respected social standing. But, at heart, Easy is a protester, not a politically organized militant ready to add to the gathering momentum of the civil rights campaign.

Optimism, if there is any in the novel, comes from beyond the grave: the true friendship Wenzler entertained for Easy. Indeed, as the novel closes, Easy becomes conscious of the terrible events which have unfolded and pays homage to the dedicated Jewish militant who became his sincere friend while he himself had only set his sights on his own selfish short term aims: avoiding prison for having cheated the IRS. Perhaps the book suggests that racism and anti-Semitism are the same curse which must be beaten back.

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Works Cited


NOTES

2. See (among others) the very moderate *Daddy Was a Number Runner* (Louise Meriwether, 1970), or *God Bless the Child* (Kristin Hunter, 1964).

3. The historian Helen Schrecker states that most of the Jewish American members of the Communist party were second generation American Jews (Schrecker 150).

4. The unvoiced taunt, an evanescent Communist followed by the golfing president should not be missed: indeed, achieving racial fairness was not at the top of President Eisenhower’s domestic agenda.

5. Again, like the witch hunt, this brings up the question of friendship and loyalty in a dog-eats-dog world: Jackson’s was Frank Green’s probable informer in *Devil in a Blue Dress*.

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**ABSTRACTS**

The Easy Rawlins series covers three decades of from the late 1940s to the mid-1960s. A Red Death is perhaps the most political of all as it focuses on the effects of the McCarthy witch hunt. The essay argues that the period’s deleterious atmosphere ruined solidarity among the oppressed, while black political activists advocating an exodus from the US were fighting the wrong fight. The unmentioned stirrings of the civil rights campaign suggests that black political apathy was strong.

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“It’s always a little piece of language that sets off a novel”: A Linguistic Analysis of the Opening Chapter of Walter Mosley’s *White Butterfly*

Gérard Deléchelle

“One sentence and then another...”

**Preliminary remarks**

1. Critics have emphasised the part played by linguistic considerations in Walter Mosley’s novels. Mosley himself, in an interview given to *The Observer* (April 11, 1999) about *Blue Light*, stressed that “It’s always a little piece of language that sets off a novel.”

2. This quotation justifies some of the choices made here. For a linguist, the focus must be put on the writing, on “the quest for the signs which enable us to discover the suffering of the voice at work in a text” (Gault, 1994, 6, my translation). Although *White Butterfly* is the third novel of the Easy Rawlins series, we will try to mime an initial reading by putting ourselves in the position of the reader who encounters this hero for the first time.

3. Instead of proposing an analysis of the whole novel, we’ll only study the first chapter (120 lines), followed in their linear development in order to define its texture and voice:

   For every book has “its” voice or voices. The first pages of a work reveal its tone, accent, rhythm, range, color and depth. “Who speaks”, “where from”, “what for”, “how” and “to whom”? Answering these questions at length, discovering the key to this mystery would largely dissipate the enlightening obscurity of fictions at the risk of extinguishing their fires (Chénetier 321, my translation).

4. This contribution should be seen mainly as a methodological exercise yielding partial results to be exploited and elaborated, from a literary point of view for instance. But our initial quotation suggests that Mosley does not treat the linguistic aspects lightly.
A quick glimpse at the presentation of the introductory chapter brings out a graphic break, as the narration shifts from the arrival of a black policeman, Quinten Naylor, at Easy Rawlins’s home, to the discovery of the dead body of a young woman.

Easy Rawlins and Quinten Naylor negotiating identities

“EASY RAWLINS!” someone called. Our attention is immediately drawn to the name and particularly Easy. Anyone familiar with the series will recall Easy’s full first name, Ezekiel, which carries biblical overtones. A reader fresh to the series will inevitably be tempted to take it literally and to imagine various traits of character evoked by the adjective, such as a certain detachment or on the contrary as an invitation for the hero to keep his cool. When his baby daughter Edna repeats her father’s name with a lisp, “Eathy”, it sounds as a sort of tender and ironic echo which reinforces the idea of playfulness associated with the child (cf. as she played peacefully), but that is denied by the relationship with this intruding someone. The opening sentence that draws attention to this person called Easy also betrays a very clear narrative choice: it is this character who will tell the story in the first person in internal focalization.

Easy’s surprise is marked by the use of the indefinite pronoun, someone, as the origin of the call has not yet been identified, but also, and probably less obviously, in the syntax of I turned to see Quinten Naylor twist the handle of my front gate. Here to does not express purpose, a desired consequence, but an unexpected one (as in: I came in, only to see that he was gone) creating an effect of surprise. Besides, the verb twist marks the feeling of aggression felt by Easy Rawlins, the intrusion impinging on his privacy in his family background: my front gate. This image is reinforced by the idyllic character of the scene of the caring father looking after his daughter playing next to him on the porch.

Easy’s description of Quinten Naylor is linguistically telling. We first note that the only verb used is to be (eight occurrences). Rather than a stylistic flaw, it draws the reader’s attention to the predicate, in particular to the comparisons and metaphors: his hands were the size of potholders, his shoulders were round melons, it was almost as if he were rage-colored. The choice of the comparers (potholders//round melons), attributable to Easy, denotes bumbling bulk and shapelessness. It is in this passage that the policeman is first given his full name Quinten Naylor to be next called three times by his first name, which proves a fairly close relationship between the two men. Only later do we learn that he belongs to the police (the Los Angeles police sergeant), an indication also found in the more reverent officer Naylor or Officer used to address him in dialogue and finally the cop (a slang word that reduces him to a mere function, the “man” in African-American parlance). He will also be described as the violent-colored man. Conversely, it is also interesting to see how Quinten’s way to address Easy goes from familiarity to respect (Easy // Easy Rawlins // Mr. Rawlins). For these fluctuating modes of address reflect the constant battle for dominance between Easy Rawlins and Quinten Naylor, and more generally between the various characters.
Easy very quickly indicates Naylor's skin colour, a proof of the essential role played for him by ethnic considerations. Quinten is not black, but a brown man. When Easy evokes Naylor's growing anger (there was a lot of red under the skin), the colour notation introduces an ironical dimension also found in the unexpected compound adjective that comes up in as if he were rage-colored. In fact, as will be seen later in Quinten was becoming visibly more crimson under his brown shell, the colour of the skin is only an outside appearance under which many things may happen. What was only a hypothetical comparison (it was almost as if he were rage-colored) will soon be presented as factual and be rapidly integrated in the form of another compound adjective: The violent-colored man. This evolution is reflected in the syntax and in particular in the passage from a rhematic construction (as if he were rage-colored) to a thematic one (the violent-colored man), a technique which is an important factor in textual cohesion.

Whereas Easy first insisted, albeit with a certain irony, on Quinten Naylor's physical strength, the picture gradually becomes less congenial: the police officer is not only presented as violent, but he dares to tread on a patch of chives fondly grown for seven years! Easy is beginning to get angry, as can be felt in his description of Naylor's hand, a beefy paw, that denotes not only strength but also bestiality. This shows the ambiguous character of the relationship between Easy and Quinten, whose sentence "Glad I caught you in" (and in particular the verb caught) might be interpreted in different ways by Easy whom the police always make uneasy.

The insistence on exchanged looks (I looked into his eyes // he stared into my face) shows that the two characters are observing and getting the measure of each other. This is reinforced by the heavy silence which establishes itself between the two men who are unable to express what they really want. This mutual embarrassment, stubborn suspicion and distrust, is reflected in the intricacies of the syntax: two complex sentences coordinated by but, each containing the verb want (He stared up into my face wanting me to ask him why he was there. But all I wanted was for me to go back into my home with my wife and children). The opposition between the two protagonists is thus more obvious in the syntax than in the words actually exchanged. Rather than merely stating the existence of rampant enmity, Mosley invites readers to draw their own conclusions.

In this initial confrontation, it is Easy who has the upper hand; he steps down to meet Quinten and his silence makes the cop uncomfortable (When I didn't say anything there was an uncomfortable moment for the Los Angeles police sergeant). He even seems to take some pleasure in the situation: his laconic answers (Yeah - Yeah. - She sure is) do not really help his interlocutor who cannot go beyond the phatic function of small talk (Beautiful child). Easy even ironically comments on Quinten's speech (Quinten was from back east, he spoke like an educated white northerner), another point on which they are opposed.

Even if it is Easy who puts an end to this cat and mouse game by finally accepting to ask Naylor (whom he calls officer) the reason for his visit, he remains in control of the situation. He greets the answer with some derision by asking whether he is under arrest, which harks back to the use of caught, although it might also be taken literally, Easy never being really sure of being on the safe side of the law. The result of that game is that Quinten now feels obliged to address Easy as “Mr. Rawlins” at a price for his self-respect, a social and personal humiliation. Easy comments explicitly on the situation and seems to take some pleasure in the fact that the Los Angeles Police Department has to ask an (almost) black cop to call on a black civilian to penetrate the ghetto, which gives us an opportunity to appreciate Easy's sense of formula when he sarcastically thinks: I was
worth a precinct full of detectives when the cops needed the word in the ghetto, a quality which
might also be attributed to the authorial voice, though it is mainly Easy’s voice that we
are hearing. Easy extends his advantage even further to the limits of politeness when he
says in his own variety of black speech: I don’t need no Sunday drive with the cops, which
infuriates Naylor.

14 Easy here appears as a lucid, detached and flippant observer as is shown by the use of
visibly in Quinten was becoming visibly more crimson under the brown shell. But just when one
might have expected Easy to make the most of his advantage and refuse the offer, he
accepts it, out of compassion for a brother, a fellow black whom he does not want to
humiliate, even though he is a cop, the word shell inviting us to look for the man
underneath. Besides giving more consistency to Easy’s character, it introduces an
element of surprise in the plot.

15 For lack of space we’ll pass more quickly over the end of the scene which completes the
portrait of Easy in his family surroundings. This interlude has a dual function. On the one
hand, as it keeps Quinten Naylor waiting a little longer, it is a textual device that
underlines the gap between the two men, Easy’s un-ease. On the other hand, it makes
Easy appear as a good family man, generous enough to have adopted a young mute
Mexican boy —but not a perfect husband: Macho-like, he just shouts from the outside1 to
his wife (who is ironing) that he is leaving, and entrusts the security of his wife and
daughter to little Jesus.

16 An arresting aspect of this passage is its fairly slow rhythm. It also presents a recurrence
of the isotopy of vision and detection in social relationships: peek // look up here at me //
Jesus squinted up at me // looking me in the eye this time. It of course exploits the archetypes
of the hard-boiled: the laconic hero with a shrewd look and outlook on people and life.
The passage also shows the flexibility of Mosley’s prose passing from the terseness of:
Come on down here to the analytic fluidity of The little Mexican boy climbed down the tree and
ran up to me, with alliterations and paronomastic effects like with a silent smile stitched
across his face. As for Easy’s remark, I waved at my forty-foot avocado tree, it is yet another
elliptical way to stress that Naylor (and the intrigued reader, too) are intruders in Easy’s
world: only later do we learn that Jesus serves as a lookout up the tree.

The discovery of the victim

17 The second part of this introductory chapter confirms the efficiency of Mosley’s prose.
The word Officer (Naylor) with which the paragraph begins seems to place us at once in
the midst of the inquiry. The general indications on the location of the scene, the vacant
lot where the as yet unseen body lies, are seen through Easy’s eyes. He draws our
attention (I noticed) to a detail, no doubt overlooked by the police: a meticulously
described shoe (so the reader does not miss it): a bright patent-leather white pump in the
gutter that serves as a proleptic indicator from a narratological point of view. At this stage
and during most of the passage, the reader will have the impression that he is ahead of
the narrator-cum-character.

18 So step by step, on the paratactic mode, we discover the first elements constituting the
scene: the ambulance (foreboding trouble) flanked by police patrol cars. Flanked may be
taken literally, but it also alludes to the work done by the police to isolate the victim for
reasons yet unclear. Easy notes both the number (seven) and the skin color (exclusively
white) of the policemen who constitute a cordon (shoulder to shoulder across) preventing the onlookers from having access to the scene; and the festive atmosphere which will also have to be reinterpreted when the body has been identified. All these details function as proleptic indicators.

19 The scene is first presented in a parodic tone (the lot was decorated with two rusted-out Buicks) in clear contrast to the underlying tension that the reader anticipates—and as if Easy’s mind was unconsciously refusing to accept reality. The presentation of this dilapidated lot in fact foretells and provides a natural setting for the bad news to come. The tension is suggested by the syntax of the next sentence informing us that a knotty oak had died toward the back end of the lot. Instead of a banal wording like “there was a dead oak at the back of the lot”, the use of the active form of the verb die with an inanimate subject invites us to restore a human subject, an indirect means of introducing the presence of a victim, engraved in the folds of syntax as it were. The way has been prepared for the discovery of the body, although it is yet only second or third hand information or rumour: A boy said, “Lloyd saw’er. She dead.”

20 In this inevitable march towards what we begin to expect or fear, Easy, and the reader with him, still have an obstacle to overcome, that of everyday ordinary racism. Seeing a black man nearing the cordon, a policeman grabs his arm in a rude and condescending way: “Hey you, son”, the word son depriving Easy of his status, which obliges Quinten to call him Mr. Rawlins for the second time. One should note that Easy does not respond and treats that disrespect and arrogance (which he considers instinctive) with the contempt he reserves for other white people in similar situations. In fact, his attention concentrates on the four policemen who are looking towards the tree. Once more, the form of the sentence is more important than its content to give us access to what the narrator feels. The construction: I couldn’t make out what it was that they saw is a mixture of cleft sentence (a focalizing structure of the form it is X that Y) and an indirect question (or headless relative) what they saw. The intricate character of the sentence reflects Easy’s uncertainty.

21 Before getting any closer, Easy recognizes one of the plain-clothes policemen whose description might be compared to that of his black counterpart Q. Naylor. Like Quinten, he is massive in build, but with the difference that Hobbes is fat all over: He was a burly white man, the kind of fat man who was fat everywhere. Once more, the impression given by the contact of the policeman’s hand is unpleasant, a feeling stressed by the inventive imaging: He held out a pillowy hand. The indefinite article reinforces the characterization that follows. Easy refers to this policeman as: One of the cops // Roland Hobbes // Roland. This unexpected familiarity may be due to the fact that Hobbes does not show an overt scorn for Easy, whom he calls Mr. Rawlins. Besides, each use of Roland appears in contexts where Naylor is also mentioned by his first name.

22 Easy pays little attention to this extended hand as he proceeds towards the tree, the centre of his and everybody’s interest. So it is through Easy’s eyes that the reader discovers a young woman wearing a party dress, sitting peacefully at the foot of the dead oak tree. At first sight, the scene seems natural and the alliteration in a pink party dress rather reassuring. But gradually, in small touches, the description takes on a different signification. A closer look might have shown some disturbing details like the adjective open in: a little open at the breast, which could apply to the dress but also to the body and thus suggest a wound. Besides, the straight legs, a little apart, the head tilted to the side and the position of the hands are not as natural as they might have seemed. But the main clue is that one foot is bare while the other one sports a white pump. The parallelism of
the construction: *her left foot // her right foot*, is offered to us without comment. If the sentence seems to begin on a fairly light descriptive mode (*Her left foot sported a white pump*), it ends abruptly on the adjective *bare* (*her right foot was bare*), which opens onto more disturbing interpretations.

The description is rendered even more complex when Easy associates in the same memory the feeling of softness and strength from Hobbes’s hand and what he (wrongly) believes to be an insect perched on the girl’s temple. An illusion in both cases. Just as there is no insect on the girl’s face, one wonders whether Easy does not transfer to Hobbes’s hand a softness that he unconsciously attributes to the girl. This confusion of feelings, a sign of disorder in Easy, is also due to the uncertainty of memory, as can be seen in the use of tenses. *I remember the softness and the underlying strength of Roland Hobbes’s hand*, the only occurrence of a present tense in the narrative parts of the text, refers to the (present) time of enunciation, whereas the preterit in *I wondered why she did not bat it away* two lines later takes us back to the time of the event. It is this instability of syntax and of referenciation that gives us access to Easy’s loss of his bearings.

What follows confirms the emotion that has now taken hold of Easy (and the reader). For he suddenly realizes that what he (mis)took for an insect is a clot of dried blood. The use of the *be * *ing* form stresses the dissociation and contrast between the character who has nothing but platitudes to spout to Hobbes (*Nice to see you*) when shaking his hand, and the one who later realizes and must finally admit that he is actually facing death. The moment of consciousness over, Easy tries to analyze what has just happened to him, but for the reader the main interest lies in this mounting emotion, the dimension of affect which is also brought to light in the transformation of *a woman in a pink party dress* into a nice young girl: *The girl was young and pretty. It was hard for me to think that she was dead.* By contrast and interwoven with Easy’s thoughts, the fairly detached but laconic comments exchanged by the two policemen are much more prosaic and evoke with a remarkable linguistic economy a serial killer: *Same thing // Both? // Third one*, a concise remark on which the chapter closes and which creates a sense of suspense for the reader. The chapter which had started with two words *Easy Rawlins*, ends the same way (*Third one*). The loop is closed.

**Concluding remarks**

Although brief, this excerpt is sufficient to discuss some of the characteristics of Mosley’s writing, his “little undersong” in Jerome Charyn’s words.

Even if his novels seem to follow some of the archetypes of the mystery story with serial killers, corruption and the rest, Mosley subverts the codes if only by the personality of the main protagonist. Easy is not a traditional, classical detective and his methods are rather personal. As in the other Easy Rawlins mystery novels, Mosley uses period details and slang to create authentic settings and characters, especially Easy, the earnest, complex, reluctant amateur what? Neither a detective nor the usual type of informer. A keen observer, laconic, fairly detached and often ironical, he knows how to judge blacks and whites alike. He knows the ghetto section of L. A. as no policeman can and is himself faced with personal, social, and moral problems. Of course, this should be substantiated by a study of the whole novel to see how Mosley adapts and subverts these codes.
In this opening chapter we see at least two facets of the character. First, the tough street wise black concerned with who he is in relations to others, wife or child, brown or white outsiders. Then, a sensitive person perturbed by the discovery of the dead body of a young black girl. But Easy does not put his sensitive self into words: the language, as we have seen, brings that into the reader’s consciousness.

Mosley’s writing has the power of suggestion. While the construction, progression and rhythm of the narration, appear to be fairly classical, the economy of the language is striking. In this kind of language, the unsaid, the implicit speak more than any word can. Detective fiction is reputed to be easy reading, but the passage we have studied denies this reputation. When it is the choice of words, of images, the syntax, in short the poetics that give the reader access to the main issues of the text, the problem is no longer to know whether it is a mystery novel or any other genre. It’s just literature. As Mosley himself said in the interview already mentioned: “Sentences and the way they are crafted is the basis of what a novel is.”

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Works Cited


NOTES

1. See different examples in P. Gault, “Rhématique/Thématique ou les élans de la syntaxe”, Graat 21, Tours, 1999
2. Note here the use of the temporal-causal use of when.
3. Note the concision of adverbial sequences like: out back // back east // out front.
4. The past participle dried refers to the action more than the adjective dry, which would insist on the resultant state.
5. Unlike the descriptions of the policemen, no indication of skin colour is given in relation to the victim. It is only indirectly (the disinterest of white policemen, the empathy of Easy for the girl) that we may guess that she must be black.
6. “I look for the undersong when I start a text. What is the music that underlines the narrative, never mind the meaning, what is the music?”, J. Charyn, “Desperately seeking for the undersong”, *Effets de voix*, Graat 12, Tours, 1994, 42-43

ABSTRACTS

A linear linguistic analysis of the opening chapter of *White Butterfly* shows how the atmosphere of the novel is gradually created with the presentation of the reluctant Easy Rawlins and his relationships with the police (black and white). The study of this short chapter also reveals some of the characteristics of Mosley’s writing.

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V. African-American detective fiction writers speak
Round Table Discussion: Paula Woods, Gar Haywood, Barbara Neely and Participants in the Symposium

1 Transcription by: Alice Mills (Université de Caen), Jacqueline Launay, Marie-Françoise Gorge and Claude Julien (Université de Tours).

2 Claude Julien (Université de Tours). Thank you for coming all the way to Tours. Please use this session to speak very freely about your art. Many in the audience have read your stories and will be interested to hear the creators’ sides – probably different from their fantasies as readers. The organizing team have made no plan on how this panel should be run, so we will leave it to you to decide on whether to start with the east or the west coast...


4 My first exposure to the genre was as a child sneaking into my parents’ bedroom. When they would leave the house, I would sneak into the bedroom to see what they were reading. My mother was reading Henry Miller and so, secretly, I too read *Tropic of Cancer* and all of those other wonderful novels by Miller and Frank Yerby that I was not supposed to read. But, more importantly, I also read my father’s Chester Himes novels, attracted as much by the covers as anything else. Remember, this was in the in the 1960’s and the Himes novels at that time had very lurid covers of scantily-clad women twisted around in embraces with men and the guns. And once I opened them, I was treated to Himes’ raw world of thugs and conmen, cops and that fascinating word *mother rapers*...

5 Although my interest was piqued by Chester Himes early in life, I had no clue about who he was, what his background was, his history or reputation in France or in the United States. It wasn’t until I went to college at the University of Southern California and took classes from Professor Lloyd Brown, that I was reintroduced to Himes and was able to place his work in a historical, social and literary context. But, sadly, Himes stood alone in 1970 as there were very few known writers of African American detective fiction. As for
me, I went on and did other things —went into business, had a career in a completely
different field and consequently did not meet anyone else with an interest in African
American mysteries until 1992 when I attended a large conference of American
booksellers and publishers.

6 In that year, my husband and I had published I, Too, Sing America: The African-American
Book of Days, a book of days on African American history and achievement. A publisher
called upon me to meet Walter Mosley. Walter had just published his second Easy Rawlins
novel, A Red Death. It occurred to me there must have been someone between Chester
Himes and Walter Mosley, but I didn't know who that could have been. Because I also
knew from researching for I, Too, Sing America that Rudolph Fisher had written a mystery I
ended up editing a collection of twenty-two short stories and novel excerpts, finding
along the way writers like Gar Anthony Haywood, Gary Phillips, Barbara Neely and other
wonderful writers who, to my mind, were not as well-known as they should have been.

7 When my anthology, Spooks, Spies and Private Eyes, was published in 1995, a number of
critics and readers said it was the first time they had ever seen a collection of American
detective fiction that had as many contemporary African American authors. It was a great
joy and pleasure to have brought all these stories together because it gave readers,
scholars and critics a chance to discover writers new to them. One of the things that I was
told a lot by booksellers was that customers would walk into their bookstores with the
anthology and say things like: “I've read this short story by Gar Anthony Haywood. Where
are his books?” That was particularly gratifying because I believe African American
fiction in general is under-appreciated in my country and African American detective
fiction in particular does not get the kind of recognition it deserves for its realism, its
perspective on social issues, for its being literature like any other.

8 One of the unexpected benefits of editing Spooks, Spies and Private Eyes is that I had an
opportunity to read a lot of African American detective fiction, to hear the unique voices
of Blanche White, Easy Rawlins, Aaron Gunner, and others. This kind of “self-study"
course also made me aware of the voices that I wasn't hearing. One of the voices
underrepresented in my reading was of the African American who opted for a career in
law enforcement, which in many ways was not surprising. In the United States, African
Americans have an uneasy relationship with public safety officials. In many black
communities, the fireman is our friend but not the policeman. So I thought it would be
challenging to write of a woman who had the political sensibilities of Neely’s Blanche
White, who was steeped in the milieu of Los Angeles as are Haywood’s Aaron Gunner,
Mosley’s Easy Rawlins, or Phillips’s Ivan Monk, but who also chose to work the other side
of the street by being a cop. And then there were the Rodney Kings riots in Los Angeles in
1992, which illuminated a profound difference in perspective, with many African
Americans in L. A. calling the event an uprising or a civil insurrection, while some African
Americans and most cops, regardless of color, considered them riots. In other words, some
of us are black and are opposed to the police, some of us are black and choose to be the
police.

9 In Inner City Blues, my protagonist, LAPD homicide detective Charlotte Justice is a mass of
dichotomies. She is black but she is a police officer. She chooses a working-class
profession, policing, in opposition to a family of upwardly mobile, highly educated
professionals. She is socially militant, a race woman, but fair-skinned, a term which in
America implies a perceived higher social status and privileges not available to darker-
hued people. And so in establishing these dichotomies in Charlotte's personality and
circumstances, my objective was to create a woman who might, because of her skin color, appear to have advantages in some twisted part of American society but, at the same time, was very militant in her philosophy and attitudes and very much identified with the black community she was trying to serve.

I chose to set the novel’s beginning in 1992 and the riots because, having grown up in L. A. and lived there nearly all my life, I remembered the Watts riots in 1965 while my father and mother could remember the Zoot Suits Riots in 1943. And so there are passages in *Inner City Blues* where Charlotte’s talking to her father about the Rodney King riots and he’s telling her rioting is not new for L. A., that it’s caused by “just hate, pure and simple.”

For me, late 20th century Los Angeles has a richness based on its social dichotomies, its diversity and its echoes of a historical past that are compelling. To chronicle that history through the eyes of my detective makes me feel as if I’m writing contemporary history, before the revisionists can tell us what and how things happened. I had great fun in creating the series and writing the first mystery, all the way down to selecting the title, *Inner City Blues*, which is taken from the Marvin Gaye protest song of the seventies.Using that title was my sly way of saying that, some twenty odd years after the song was written, L. A., indeed America, had not really changed that much.

Gar Anthony Haywood. My name is Gar Anthony Haywood and my claim to fame rests in my writing two separate African American series of mystery. My first-born character, so to speak, is an African American private investigator named Aaron Gunner who works in contemporary South-Central L. A.; and my second series deals with a pair of retired African Americans, a married couple who have five grown children and four of the five are incorrigible and difficult to live with. They buy an Airstream trailer and a pickup truck and they sell their house and live on the road. They drive everywhere in America and solve mysteries—and evade their children. That’s their purpose in life. And the people that read the series, that’s what they get the most out of: the parental aspect of the book. They always come to me and say, “You know, I’ve often wanted to leave my children, too!” I think that’s what I’m most proud of. Authors are always looking to strike a vein. And I think I hit on that one pretty well. So, I’m proud of it.

Getting back to Aaron Gunner, the first Gunner book came out in 1988, *Fear of the Dark*. The process that I followed to become a published author was fairly long. Like Paula, I basically became a writer because I grew up as a reader. I always had a book in my hand as a child. I was reading constantly; and I primarily became a recreational reader because of my father. The situation sounds almost similar to Paula’s. Woods/Haywood, there may be a connection. We have never researched it all the way through... My father always left his reading material around the house specifically in the bedroom and, like Paula, I picked these books that fascinated me and read them. The difference is that whereas for Paula all the fascination was about sex... for me it was all about adventure. My father read science fiction avidly, primarily fantasy. So, the books he left lying around were Robert E. Howard’s *Conan the Barbarian...* he read a lot of Robert Heinlein and Isaac Asimov. The covers always had a spaceship or an aircraft, or an astronaut or a muscular barbarian with a huge sword... giant serpents... The look of the books was appealing, and I started reading. And from that I learned to read strictly for pleasure... I’d say that around the age of thirteen I decided writing was what I wanted to do. Unfortunately, I did not really pursue it as a career. I didn’t really believe I could make a living doing that. So, it took me a long time to devote the amount of time and effort it would take to complete a book. It took me years, as a matter of fact. I basically wrote short stories and tried to have
them published in magazines but never sold one. And it was not until I finally determined that, firstly, I wasn’t going to be a science fiction author, I was going to be a mystery author, if anything, and, secondly, that I probably should write a novel and give up the short story genre for the time being. It wasn’t until I made that decision that I actually got something published. As Paula alluded to earlier, it’s true that when we both came along there was a real dearth of African American authors and characters. Let alone writers of color. There weren’t any real characters of color in contemporary mystery fiction. And I was kind of baffled that someone reading as much of it as I was—that the few times I would come across African American characters they were always basically villains, or the junkie on the street, or the thief. There was always a negative context to the characters of color. And they were certainly never the protagonist, the hero, the developing figure. So, I don’t know if I consciously decided to change that with my character Aaron Gunner but I know I wanted to write a mystery that not only dealt with African American issues but actually took place in the geography of L. A., the milieu of African Americans, that we were not seeing in any of the books I had been reading. As I’ve said many times, if you read Raymond Chandler, if you read... not so much Ross MacDonald, but most L. A. -based classic mystery authors, you only see Hollywood and Vine. If you get your sense of what southern California life is like from them, you figure the state is all palm trees and girls in bikinis on roller skates, and the beach.

One of the things I wanted to do when I wrote my first book was take the reader to a part of L. A. that was not shown in the books that were available. So I made sure that Gunner is a product, as I am, of L. A., South Central L. A. specifically. In my books, in a very real sense, the geography is as much a character as Gunner —by design.

It’s funny. Paula and I thought about this the last day or so —that it’s very humbling actually to find your work taken as seriously as you people obviously do. We certainly take it seriously when we write; but we are unfortunately conditioned to have it treated with something less than reverence, because detective fiction in general is thought to be a light-weight genre, certainly not serious literature. And I think that is a slap in the face to the many authors of color and otherwise that write detective fiction today, extremely well; that have a command of language beyond many people who write in any field. So, I’m very honored to be here and I thank you very much for coming and paying as much attention to my work as you have. It’s very encouraging. Thank you.

Barbara Neely. My name is Barbara Neely. I have to say I feel like something of a fraud, as I know nothing about detective fiction. When I started writing the Blanche books, I did not intend to write a series, only a single novel that was in essence a book of social commentary about race, class and gender; and I assumed that I was writing a novel that had a murder in it. The publishing industry informed me that there was no such category, therefore it became a mystery novel. But as I said, I don’t consider myself a mystery writer because I don’t know enough about the genre to do that. To me mystery writers are people who have done their homework, who understand when you put in those red herrings and clues and how to sort of feel that suspense and I never knew anything about that. As I was writing the first book that was published, my editor told me that the first murder generally takes place by page 75... Absolute news to me. What I really wanted to do was to write social commentary from the point of view of the kind of character who really gets hurt in life, that is a working class, poor, large, extremely darkskinned black woman who has, as some people have said, an attitude problem. So I don’t consider Blanche a detective or even an amateur sleuth. When I think about Blanche I think of her...
parents, I think of Jesse B. Simple who is one of Langston Hughes’s characters in many short stories, and of Alice Childress’s Just One of the Family, a book about a maid. These are the people whom I think of as being Blanche’s parents.

17 So when I worked on the mystery aspects of the book I tried very hard to approach it from the point of view of what would an average, every day woman do, if she is presented with a body. And Blanche thinks of herself as someone who has a healthy interest in other people’s business, though people have said that she is nosy. So knowing very many people like that, it’s sort of easier that way, for me too, to put her in the sort of frame of reference that I want her in.

18 As I said, I only intended to write one book. The second book happened because my editor suggested that I might want to do a sequel, which I didn’t think was a good idea. I had already written this book, I had already made this woman, I mean why would I write a second book about the same character? I’d write on something else because I began publishing short stories, not mystery short stories, but short stories... It was a week or so after he suggested this that I received my bank statement and I called him back... I told him that a sequel would be a wonderful idea. You see, this is how I make decisions.

That is how the series began. Once I got into my second book, I realized the mystery genre was the perfect place to do what I wanted to do, and that is to talk about serious subjects in a way that is accessible and humorous and, as I said, from the kind of perspective that we rarely hear from, from people whom I call “the mud”, the invisible people who see everything but that are rarely seen, because who knows more than the people who empty your waste baskets and wash your underwear. It seemed to me that writing about race and class, Blanche was a perfect model. What better situation than a black woman working in a home with some white people in the South?

19 In the second book I really wanted to write about color and class within the black community. As Paula has said, color has been a problem in black America ever since the first slave woman was raped and produced the halfwhite child who is treated better than black children because he was considered to be more human. This has unfortunately become a part of Afro-American culture. I always like to point out to people that it is sadder in our community because it comes out in our repression, but it is real in everyone’s community, at least in America. The blue-eyed-blonds still get the best jobs, the pretty people still make more money, because it is a color society right across the board. I decided on that topic because Blanche is an extremely dark-skinned woman and when I did readings and went on tour with the first book, dark skinned women started telling me their horror stories, stories that we like to think no longer exist because somewhere in the 1960s somebody said black was beautiful. But I think it was somebody who wasn’t with a black person...

20 When I chose that subject, I realized that this is the way the books will always work because the subjects will always be organic to Blanche’s life. It will always be something that is intrinsic to her life, someone that she cares about, someone to whom she feels she owes some sort of obligation, but never an outsider. So there also would never be a police solution in the Blanche books because despite police hard work, it is not the police who solve the problems in the communities of the Blanches of the world. And there is probably never going to be a Blanche book in which things get sort of neatly tied up because this is not what happens in life. People have asked me about a character who sort of disappears in the second book, about what happened to him, where is he? I don’t know. He is gone. People disappear in life. You don’t know what happened to them all the time.
So when it came time to do the third book, it occurred to me that if you get your news about what is happening in Afro-American communities from the major white newspapers, you assume that all of the women are fourteen and have two children and are pregnant and all of the males are fourteen and sell crack. You never hear about the generations of black people who grow up in inner city communities raising families just like everyone else, so I wanted to give a slice of inner city lives, which I did by placing Blanche in an actual inner city community in Boston. I will never, ever set another Blanche book in a real place again. Because there is a very evil minister in that book and when I read from the book, before the book was even published, I told people, you know, everything in this book is fictitious including the housing development where she lives. This minister doesn't exist; these people do not exist. I was hardly finished with the reading before a man stood up and said: “That minister, that’s minister so and so. I went to his church!” There are three ministers in Boston who are candidates. And every once in a while somebody would call me or see me on the street and ask me: “Is he the one?” Besides, you get penalized if you set a book in a real place. Numbers of people have told me: “You know, the number 38 bus doesn’t go down Warring.” So I’m off with real places!

All of the other three books take place in fictitious locales. Blanche’s hometown, Farleigh, N. C., came about because I used to live in Raleigh, and when I lived there I wanted to get as far from there as I possibly could. So when I started writing these books Farleigh seemed a logical name.

The second book takes place in a fictitious upper class black resort on the coast of Maine and numbers of readers have told me that they got nothing from this place. When I wrote the book I had never been to Maine, but did Rice Burroughs go to Africa to write Tarzan? And I had an advantage over him. I had a video store. I went to my video store and I got the Maine video and I watched it for months until they asked me to return it. But people who live in Maine say it does, in fact, sound like the place, so the fictitious places are working out very well.

Paula L. Woods. Were you thinking of a place like Oak Bluffs?

Barbara Neely. Well, upper-class black resorts are real microcosms of the kind of colorism we’ve been talking about. When you go there, you have a hard time distinguishing whether a lot of the people really are people of color because they are so fair skinned. Look at the economy of black America. It’s been changing over the last couple of generations, but for a time, any black person who had made any significant amount of money was a light skinned person.

The second Blanche book is called *Blanche Among the Talented Tenth* which is a term that W. E. B. DuBois used and somebody tried to argue with me that he didn’t have color in mind. The color issue is still working. Oak Bluffs is an upper-class black resort in Massachusetts on Martha’s Vineyard. My editor really put a fair amount of pressure on me to set the book in Oak Bluffs and I didn’t want to set it there because I didn’t want people to think I went down there with my notebooks to make nasty comments about them. I also, then, found out that my editor’s family had been one of the few poor white families that grew up in Oak Bluffs, so I told him he was going to have to get his own revenge... Absolutely! [Laughter.]

The subject of the latest book is really various kinds of violence against women. Blanche has mentioned in every one of the books that she had been raped at some point in her hometown. The last book takes place there and she has an opportunity to confront her
rapist, as well as to deal with other kinds of violence against women. It was really interested to me because her position on battering, for example, is very different from mine. We have different opinions about numbers of things, and this is one of them, so it was interesting to work with a character who believes that, well, if your husband hits you, you just bang him in the head with a frying pan, pack your bags, take your children and leave. And of course, as we all know, it is not quite that easy. Working her to the point where she understood it was not that easy and came up with a solution, that, I thought, was really quite wonderful. It was a real experience for me. And of course the books to me are, in many ways, an extension of my own political work. It is interesting that all three of us here have had other careers first and I’m wondering how true this is for other African American writers, that we don’t come directly to writing but sort of build another kind of life and sort of work our way into it, probably for some of the same reasons. Certainly for me, I was always encouraged at the university to write, but all the writers I knew were working as waitresses and... not making quite enough to pay my rent... I think I was 40 when I nationally published my short stories for the first time. [...] 

So, as I said, this character for me is less a detective than she is an observer of the social scene, and a reporter on that scene and a presenter of the kind of information that you would rarely get. One of the things that happens to me frequently, talking with non African-American writers, is that they feel as though they’ve been given some information about the black community that they would not have otherwise. And of course the other major thing that I wanted to do with Blanche was to develop what I call a behavioral feminist, that is a woman who does not come to her feminism through the academy, through the literature or organizations, but through the experience of her life. If you asked Blanche if she is a feminist I don’t know how she would answer that question. I think if you asked her what she thinks of Gloria Steinem, she would probably ask if she is in a soap opera or on TV, and have no idea who these people are. But if you ask her all of the feminist litmus test questions, that is: should women make equal pay for equal work or will they be able to make it intellectually, all of those questions, you’d get the feminist answers. So it was very interesting for me to try to work through feminism from the “gut up” as opposed to “from the head”.

The other thing I wanted very much to do with this character was to have her be both a very traditional black woman and a very non-traditional one. And I think she is very traditional in that she is extremely attached to her community and her family and her friends: she is raising her dead sister’s two children (something she had no intention to do) but this is what the family demands and so this is the part you have to play. On the non-traditional side, I wanted her to be a big black woman who finds herself extremely attractive and doesn’t quite understand why other people will not find her extremely attractive. I also wanted her to be very lusty. She is a middle-aged woman, you know there is some rumor going on out there, that middle-aged women aren’t having any fun in the bedroom, so I thought, perhaps, I would add that. I don’t think there is any sex at all in the first book and black women would come to readings shaking their copy of the book, saying: "When’s Blanche going to get some, Black women never get any in the book!"

Gar Haywood. Was that intentional in the first book, or did it simply happen that way?

BarbaraNeely. It simply happened that way but she certainly made up for it! Absolutely! There was a number of non-traditional things that I wanted her to do. I also wanted her to be a woman who chose not to have biological children and I thought that was
important because we still live in a world in which women are given the impression that if your womb has not been used, you cannot be a real woman and, as a childless person myself, I thought I would perhaps like to say something about that subject. She is also a woman who does not process her hair, does not wear make-up, does not do any of that, who thinks that just the way she came in the world is absolutely perfect. I thought that that was important for all of us, non-traditional looking women, to have some champion out there who was talking about us in a very positive way. Blanche loves men, but she is not interested in getting married, she is not interested in having a man live in her house, and I decided to do this because I have numbers of friends who have the same attitude. I don’t know where the character is going, I don’t know what the fifth book will be, except that, I think the subject of the fifth book may be “ageism”, because I keep having this fantasy of Blanche standing in the doorway of her mother’s bedroom, and her mother is standing beside the bed in her slip and there’s this naked man lying across her mother’s bed, dead. I originally thought he was dead, but I don’t think so now because he is a character from the third book that I like a great deal and decided not to kill off.

But once again, there will be, there will always be, some sort of sociological bent to all the books, because this is the part that interests me. For me, the mystery aspects of the books are what the magician does with her left hand, while the trick is being done with the right hand, and the left hand is being flashed to sort of hold your attention. If you read the second book, you may not want to know everything there is to know about colorism in the black community, but you do want to know who did what to whom, so you will finish the book to find that out and, on the way, I will tell you all of these other things that I think you need to know about colorism. I do think of Blanche in that sense as being somewhat subversive, because you think you are getting one thing and in fact you are getting something very different.

33 **Paula L. Woods.** There is something Barbara said and that is in her writing that really struck me about sex because that was one of the things that I really felt strongly about when I was researching African American detective fiction —that I was not seeing black women portrayed as sexual beings. So there is a passage in *Inner City Blues* where Charlotte runs into Aubrey Scott, a man she’s had a crush on since high school, and later there are some erotic sex scenes in the book. I believe the book *Black Erotica* had just been published when I was writing *Inner City Blues* and I was influenced by it and probably even my secret reading of Henry Miller. What has been interesting is the response I get from people who either say: “Ooh! Hey! Aah!”... or: “You know, I read mysteries for the plot, not the sex.” But, regardless of the response, I feel it was important to create characters who were fully female. I also created a character, Billie Truesdale, who is lesbian, and I wanted to be able to show both sides of that equation but, inasmuch as the novels are written in the first person, I haven’t really been able to explore the other woman’s life as I’d like. But Barbara really struck a chord in me and I was so glad in *The Talented Tenth* that you introduce a sexual element, and that she does have that attraction to... I can’t think of the guy’s name, that guy who disappears...

34 **Gar Haywood.** Yea... that guy... the bad guy... One of the things that Barbara pointed out and Paula actually mentioned earlier too is the consequence it has on us as historians. Consciously or subconsciously, that really is what we set out to do. People are always surprised to find that our books are as political as they are. Because they are “mysteries”, they are supposed to be entertainment. They are not supposed to say anything substantial about the society we live in. But if we all sat down and really examined why
we started to write as African Americans who have to live with the misconceptions people have about us, we would say we set out to dispel these myths of which there are so many. So, when Barbara was talking about that backbone of a serious societal subject, I thought we will never want for material because prejudice is abundant and here to stay. That’s really why we write. My first Gunner book came out just a year before Walter Mosley’s first novel, and Chester Himes was the only real model I had. People always ask: “How did you develop your character? What did you set out to do?” My answer to that is always: “I concentrated more on what I did not want him to be than on what I did want him to be. I did not want him to be broke, I did not want him to be subversive, I did not want him to be overly dependent on anyone. I wanted him to be somewhat ambiguous in terms of how he sounds, you know when he walks into a room... well this is a black man... or this must be a white guy... or he is fair-skinned... he is dark-skinned. I wanted him to be the enigma that many of us actually are, you know. Because people have a tendency to say “well this is a black man, this is a black character, this is what he must be”. I don't want him to conform to this model as that’s not how we really are. We're all individuals, all completely different and we make up who we are as we go, and the fact of the matter is none of us will ever create the African American character because the African American spirit is too varied.

Barbara Neely. There was also something I wanted to comment on, particularly because you’re both from California. One of the reasons why your books are so popular on the East Coast is that East Coast people have very little idea of what it is like to live on the West Coast. They do think, as Gar has stated, it’s bikinis and palm trees. I mean you bring the rest of us some knowledge we don’t otherwise get.

Also, in all our books, we introduce people to language in a different way. Common words have different meanings sometimes. There are words that belong to us that are not in the dictionary but that any black person would know if you spoke to them. For example, I have now an e-mail from a Danish lady who is doing her dissertation on African American fiction and she wrote to me about the word "astuperious" I used in a book, but she couldn’t find in dictionaries. The word is used in a way that if you bring just a little attention you can figure it out, and she had. Her e-mail made it clear she had figured out that it was a way of saying somebody was being contrary or difficult. When I used the word it didn’t occur to me that it wasn’t everybody’s word. My editor, on occasions, has asked me to change words she doesn’t understand; and lots of times the reason is she doesn’t think white people would grasp them. But, as I said, the words are used in context. If you can’t figure out meaning in context, well you can’t read anyway.

Paula L. Woods. The same thing happened to me with the phrase “the dozens.” There’s a line in my second mystery, Stormy Weather, about playing the dozens, which my current editor questioned. I said: “What do you think it means in the context of the sentence?” Her reply: “Well, I assumed they’re playing a game.” “What kind of a game?” I asked. She eventually pieced it together. The other word they had difficulty with in Stormy Weather was “saditty” as in “saditty society Negroes.” When I challenged my editor to define it, she said: “Well, it sounds like she is saying they are stuck up” and I said: “Very good!”

But the other thing Barbara raised that I really made a conscious effort to address was the different classes of black folk, and the diverse communities in which we live. People who don’t know Boston did not know about Jamaica Plains and for them to discover that this lovely, largely black suburb exists in Boston was a revelation. When Gar was beginning his Gunner series, he was the only one writing about South Central L. A. This was before the
Rodney King riots, when South Central L. A. meant nothing to outsiders. And after I described in *Inner City Blues* the middle to upper-middle class black sections of L. A. called View Park and Baldwin Hills, I had many people who approached me and said: “I had no idea that there were neighborhoods of black doctors and lawyers and entrepreneurs who live in 500,000 dollar houses”. I find that worth mentioning because I believe part of what we are doing with our novels is detecting, uncovering our own culture.

Jim Nesbitt, a San Francisco mystery writer, said in a conference last year that murder is a serious thing and writing about it is a serious undertaking. I think this is particularly true in black communities, because murder is the most egregious sin we commit against our community; yet it’s the one that’s trivialized in the news. Jim’s point was that, before he wrote a book with a murder in it, he really had to think about what he was unleashing on the world. I share, we all share, this concern: I always tell myself that if I am going to have a character killed, that death had better mean something to the person’s family and friends as well as to the larger society. I also expect the murder to mean something to the people who investigate it, as well as their circle of friends.

I still have a real problem and I think it may be because I did not come to this expecting or planning to write a mystery. Having a murder on purpose is fine but then the more books I write the more difficult it becomes for me to play around with murder. The book that I like the most among my Blanche stories is the second one because there is no murder in it. I have a feeling that’s the direction I am going to pursue in the future. I mean there is something that disturbs me, about making a living from violence even written on paper and I haven’t been able to get over that. That really is a hard one.

I am interested in the rapport between your creativity and your sense of duty to your community. You do not want to use murder because it feels wrong to you; but creativity can be irrational, ideologically incorrect, not necessarily under control. How do you balance your creative impulse and your fears that your stories or characters could project the wrong image?

I’ve spent most of my working life as an activist of some kind or another so I expect my work is true to my political integrity. That’s part of the reasons why using violence as a sort of entertainment thing is a little difficult for me. But I don’t have any difficulties striking the balance. It’s like everything that I have ever written has somehow been related to race, class and gender because class is very much at the basis of who Blanche is and the kind of work that she does. For me the only real difficulty is the murder, not the crime, not the idea of crime but the idea of murder. I don’t know. I may have to talk to my therapist...

That’s an interesting comment, Barbara. Actually, I did talk to my therapist, and let her read *Inner City Blues* after it was finished. One of her comments was she thought it was interesting that I used murder in the way I did to uncover and resolve some aspect of my protagonist’s past. Getting back to Professor Mills’s question, the conflicts I have around writing about murder are spiritual conflicts around the taking of a life and asking myself “Do I want to unleash that kind of energy into the public consciousness?” I have a real problem specifically with a large number of mysteries involving serial killers because, as Charlotte says in *Stormy Weather*, there are very few serial killers committing murder, contrary to popular belief. And yet, due to the perceived entertainment value, many of the widely successful mysteries and thrillers feature serial killers. That’s where I begin to hit the outer limit of how far I am willing to
go when it comes to creating a character. I try to be very careful because I want to create believable characters and situations.

45 Norlisa Crawford (Bucknell University): I just want to say one thing in defense of murder. Obviously, murder is a good way to enter these people’s intimate lives, and then you look at the development of the character. You’re talking about issues bigger than social crime.

46 Gar Haywood. This may be totally subconscious but, yes, in a way, when we write about this or that it seems we build a book around a death that counters the trivialization that it would otherwise get. On the TV news you hear someone has died but no one is up actively looking at the issues. At least, in our own way, we devote 400 pages to the significance of their life and the end of it. So, yes, that’s one way of looking at it.

47 Barbara Neely. And to me the context matters, the mystery, not the murder itself. What’s happening in Blanche’s life is really the focus.

48 Paula L. Woods. I just want to read something I found in the LAPD homicide detective’s manual: “...a homicide detective bears a heavy responsibility when called upon to investigate a death for he stands in the dead person’s shoes to protect their interests against those of everyone else”. For me, that was one of the reasons why Charlotte can do that work, because she sees herself as an advocate for the victims. And so from her standpoint as a cop she is always in that position however heinous the crime might be. It’s not about the crime for her. It’s about representing the interest of the victim.

49 Barbara Neely. It seems to me that there is a different kind of legitimacy writing about crime if your protagonist is a police officer because it is natural for such a person to be involved in a murder, it is not natural for a maid to be involved in a murder investigation.

50 Claude Julien: All our guests have described murder as a backdrop but this question is for Gar, simply because I have just brought my Gunner up to date reading All the Lucky Ones Are Dead. Aaron Gunner’s name invites playing with onamastics: Moses’s brother, Aaron the high priest; and “Gunner” who sometimes forgets to wear his Luger he only uses reluctantly, as he says in It’s Not a Pretty Sight... A high body count, all of them incidental deaths conducive to the restoration of social peace. So, I have read this story as a statement against violence, physical as well as moral...

51 Gar Haywood. Gunner’s character was very much inspired from a TV private eye in the late 1950s named Peter Gunn. I simply played with the last name to come up with Gunner... I confess I am not pro-violence. I don’t believe in the ready availability of weapons in the USA. I am not apologetic about that. I mean... it’s sure as Barbara said earlier, you basically work into the mystery medium to get to what you really want to say, and unfortunately there will be people who buy our books for the body... They want to get to that dead body, they want to know how it came to be that way, they want to see the blood, sometimes they tell you there’s not enough of it. I go out of my way to avoid describing gore. I don’t think I’ve ever written a book where the death was on stage. All the physical violence basically takes place previously or off to one side, because there is a very fine line between making an antiviolence statement and actually glorifying that violence. So I guess I walk that line as well as I can. But, again, back to the point I made earlier: in the end, many of our books are a way of signifying the significance of every death that takes place. I think it is important when somebody dies, especially if it depends on another, that time be spent at least ruminating on what that means to our society; that someone took another person’s life, what the reasons behind it were, and what was the value of it. And I am always quite frankly hesitant to talk about what my underlying
motivation is because it makes it sound like every time I sit down I set out to preach, which is the last thing you want to be accused of.

52 **Paula L. Woods.** You want to slip about in your social commentary while telling a compelling story.

53 **Gar Haywood.** Exactly. Barbara used the analogy of a magician... It’s fine to use misdirection; but if people notice that’s what you are doing, then the trick doesn’t work. So I never sit down and say: O.K. I am going to preach about this and when the story finishes they are going to have a completely different view of this subject. But I definitely want readers to think. I want them to have questions at the end; if they don’t have a single answer that’s fine. But when they close the book I want them to be asking questions that they never have asked themselves before. And you know the violence in our society is definitely one of the areas that I’ve played with the most.

54 **Barbara Neely.** People have asked me why Blanche doesn’t carry a gun and I said why would she? This is not a part of every day life. Why would somebody who cleans up people’s houses carry a gun. She carries pepper spray, she knows how to use her knees if somebody attacks her and she knows how to run like hell. That’s all she needs. But there is that sort of expectation of a certain level of preparedness for violence as though it was an every day occurrence in everybody’s life, which is pretty strange.

55 **Danièle Charest (writer and critic):** I’m sure all of you are against the death penalty. Here, we look upon American reports on this issue as incomprehensible. Is support for the death penalty growing or going down?

56 **Barbara Neely.** Unfortunately it is not as big a controversy in the United States as it ought to be. I mean I live in one of the few states that has no death penalty, and it has come up for a vote at least twice in the last four years and people wouldn’t accept it. It is amazing to me that there are people who actually believe that you can do something positive by putting someone on an electric chair. It really does speak to the myth of human intelligence.

57 **Gar Haywood.** What it really boils down to is that unfortunately America is of a mind that certain lives are disposable. To many citizens, inmates on Death Row are people that are of no consequence to our society — supposedly. And again there is the argument that the death penalty is a deterrent to other crimes, which I question seriously.

58 **Barbara Neely.** One of the major problems with American culture is the inability to empathize, that people cannot put themselves in another person’s position and that very many of the laws are really based on stereotypes, because the average American’s view of a person on welfare is that of an Afro-American woman with three children. Well, the average person on welfare is indeed a woman with three children, except that she is white. Laws are made because they assume that these laws are going to affect a certain class of people. One of the things that is becoming very popular in the United States lately is when a teenage boy commits a crime they decide to try him as an adult, and they started doing this because of young black boys involved in gang bands. Well now as you undoubtedly know there have been, all over America, young white boys from High School who are killing people and they are now stuck with this law. It does in fact rebound. Because you do not have any empathy nor put yourself in the place of a mother whose child is going to be executed, you find yourself exactly in the same position.

59 **Claudine Raynaud (Université de Tours):** Since the detective novel is about who kills who and the setting is America, the race of the characters is a crucial element. Do you deal with racial
violence in the construction of your plots? How do you find a way out of the dilemma of racial politics when one of your black characters is killed or assaulted by a white person?

Barbara Neely. In the new Blanche book, the person who has raped her is an heir to a large fortune in the South and is indeed white. And she talks very much about how she would have responded differently if he had not been who he is; that she did not report the crime when it happened because she assumed she would not get a job in another white person’s house in that town, she assumed that the police would undoubtedly hold her responsible and not do anything about it. In that book there is in fact the issue of inter-racial crime and how it’s truly different depending upon whether the detective is black and the perpetrator is white.

Claudine Raynaud: Do you deal in your novels with inter-ethnic relations, between the Black and the Hispanic communities for instance?

Paula L. Woods. Charlotte’s partner is a woman named Gena Cortez, a Hispanic detective. Her race is not emphasized in the early stages of Inner City Blues. When Gena wimps out by not accurately reporting the police’s role in an incident, Charlotte chooses to chalk it up to the fact that Gena is young and female and afraid of contradicting the guys. In the second book, the two women have more conflict, which revolves around, as Gina points out to Charlotte, “the fact that you don’t treat me like you treat the other black women in the department. You call me by my last name. You call them Billie and this and that.” Charlotte is thunderstruck by this observation, because she never considered herself to have any prejudice. So you can see, this conflict does not revolve around the murder but around the inter-personal relationship of the cops, how well or poorly they work together. Creating Gena gave me the opportunity to talk about that, especially in L. A. where the ethnic minority situation has changed dramatically. Latinos or Hispanics are now the number one majority among the ethnic minorities and are in the majority in the state of California. So that has created some tension around race between Blacks and Latinos that will provide food for thought as time goes on.

Barbara Neely. One of the things this is indicative of is that America is very much a segregated country, still. So that having a crossed population is still an oddity. I’ve been trying to figure it out in the early Blanche books. Blanche talks about having Latina and Asian girlfriends when she lived in Harlem. I am having a hard time figuring out how to do that in Boston because it is not anywhere near as organic as it would be in Harlem...

Alice Mills: Are there times when you refrain from expressing your ideas?

Gar Haywood. The short answer to that question is no. Because, in the end, I don’t think anyone of us here has written a book that they did not want to write, or in a way that they did not want. Editorial pressure... in some cases editors want to have more of this or less of that, but for the most part, the reason we are here is because we have things to say, things we want to say in the way that we want to, and that’s the standard process. However, people like to attach more premeditation to the writing process than there really is. I know I sit down and, yes, there are questions that I started with that I have to answer, but there’s no struggling with questions like “Do I want to do this?”. When the day comes that I don’t want to incorporate a murder in my book, I won’t. I am not going to fight with that. If that’s really a conscious decision I’m making, I’m going to find a way around it.
Barbara Neely. We probably do just the opposite. When you are writing, you hit that point when you ask yourself: Ooh, can I say this? You know that’s exactly what you’re going to say, what you need to say...

Gar Haywood. Yeah, yeah. Exactly...

Paula L. Woods. We had an argument (with my first editor on *Inner City Blues*) about the level of police corruption portrayed in the novel. I had originally written the ending slightly differently and my editor’s critique was that no one would believe the LAPD was so corrupt. That was post-Rodney King, but before the Rampart Division police scandal. So, I actually had to do a little bit of trimming. I conceded just enough and told them I would be coming back to this. And, as you know, the Rampart scandal broke out eight or nine months later.

Roland Bush (U. Cal. at Long Beach): Given the fact that the community you focus on is not the traditional one in the genre, and the fact that a somewhat different narrative perspective has developed within the African American literary tradition, do you find that editors attempt to pressure you to change your submitted manuscripts to make them conform more with their perceptions of the genre’s conventions?

Gar Haywood. I personally have encountered very little editorial meddling. If they came at me with “what the convention is”... that would be the start of a fight. Because I started writing this novel without caring what the norm is. I don’t believe in writing by formula. If people want to read, fine. I don’t consciously conform to anything an editor or a reader expects me to.

Barbara Neely. My first editor was a man who was involved in the 1968 Chicago Democratic Convention. He was an extremely political man, so he understood immediately what I was trying to do. My current editor does give me advice about the mystery aspect of the books because she recognizes this is not the part that interests me the most. So she sometimes has to push me to make that work. That’s the kind of interference that I really appreciate.

Paula L. Woods. My first editor was Walter Mosley’s editor and so his notion of crime fiction was non-conventional What he saw and appreciated in *Inner City Blues* was the social commentary, and understood quite clearly that the murder was being used as a device to get weightier issues.

Gérard Deléchelle (Université de Tours): Don’t you sometimes run across characters who go out of control?

Barbara Neely. Absolutely, yes, indeed! Characters who want to take over the book do exist. In the first three Blanche books, Blanche’s mother and her girlfriend are present only on the telephone because they’re in a different city. In the fourth book they are both present. And I felt as though I was trying to hold on two runaway horses who somehow were under the impression that this was their book. In the second book there is an 89 year old black feminist. I had to do numbers of rewrites to convince her that this book was not about her. Which, of course, is a compliment to yourself. If you develop a character well enough for it to have legs and walk all over you, then you’ve done your job. But there is that tension, always, yes.

Paula L. Woods. In *Stormy Weather* the whole story of the black director and how he came to be who he was at 76 years of age really made me want to write about him at 30. The whole subject of blacks in Hollywood, which is so different from Raymond Chandler’s
Hollywood that Gar mentioned, is something I have thought about many times. I may
write about it later, take that black director and re-imagine him in 1936 when he was an
extra in a Tarzan movie, but aspiring to be a filmmaker, and write the story of what it was
like from his perspective. That’s one of those things in the back of my mind, but I could
only tell so much of that story in Stormy Weather without it completely running away with
my plot.

**Barbara Neely.** But, of course, you know that story.

**Gar Haywood.** That’s right.

**Barbara Neely.** Developing Blanche, I know what kind of underwear she likes, how she
likes her fish cooked. I had to ask myself whether she was a planned pregnancy or a
surprise to her mother. All these things make a difference in what your personality is
like.

**Paula L. Woods.** The dynamics of her life?

**Barbara Neely.** Oh, no. To me the most fun-filled part in writing a book is character
development, because that’s the part that goes back to your childhood when you used to
play make-believe... I’m going to be this... and then I’m going to be someone else... And
you get to be everybody. Of course, people want to know whether Blanche is my alter ego.
And I try very hard not to hit them when they ask that. I try to explain to people that
every character in your book is you. There is no character in your book that does not
represent you in some way and the development of those characters, what they look like,
what they sound like... I love that part, I really do.

**Gar Haywood.** Well, don’t you just like it when people assume quite the opposite; that it’s
not you, that it’s that guy right there?

**Norlisha Crawford:** I teach African-American lit. I incorporate mystery and have used all of your
work to some degree. Everything you talked about, wanting to present the sociological background,
the community, is exactly the perspective I teach from. I teach it as normal lit, I talk about folk
context and all of that; so I don’t know how you feel about this being teaching material, but I just
wanted you to know the aspects that are discussed as being important within your work is what
the students definitely get, the essence.

**Paula L. Woods.** I never thought about the uses of my writing until I heard professors say
that they teach it. As a writer, you know what your intentions were but when someone
comes back to you to say what it is they thought they read, that’s always fascinating to me.
It’s like sending your kid off to school. You think you know your child well, and then you
get that first report card from the teacher and you find out there was a lot you didn’t
know about your little darling.

**Gar Haywood.** I didn’t think anyone could say they were writing a text for anybody’s
class until somebody said to me, “I went to look for that gas station! It’s not really
there...’, and I realized how seriously, how literally, people are taking it. We have to put
things in historical context. If we don’t, we’re kidding ourselves.

**Barbara Neely.** I expected Blanche to end up in the Academy because the first serious
readers, the first large audience for the books were white feminists. The books are taught
in lots of various feminist courses and this I expected. I expected Blanche would make it
there and I absolutely love it.

**Paula L. Woods** (to Norlisha Crawford). I would be interested in knowing what you are
doing in that regard because it’s the kind of thing we don’t often hear. Publishers
typically send authors on a book tour of just commercial bookstores. There is no mechanism to inform them about who reads our work in the academy. When I told Norton and Ballantine I was coming here, one of them pointed out I was not published in France, not even thinking that you would be reading my mysteries in English. This kind of symposium is bound to help us as the critical analysis and dialogue not only enrich our work but our sense of connection to a wider audience.

87 Daniel Peltzman (Université de Besançon): I have a question for all three of you: what are you currently at work on and what are your future orientations?

88 Barbara Neely. Well I am just about at the end of a novel that is not a mystery—a historical novel set in the 1950s that grew out of hearing a minister who is very important in the Civil Rights movement say that integration is arguably the worst thing that ever happened to us. This statement made me start to think about a group of black people for whom this would actually be the case. The book is set in a small town, fictitious, in upstate New York. Half the town is black and the other half is white and the book essentially deals with what happens to these people when integration hits their communities. It has got characters in it that I can hardly wait to get up in the morning to start playing with. I just really love it... When I started writing the first Blanche book I was working on another novel that was not a mystery and I thought it was a wonderful book. Unfortunately, I don't know where it is or what it was called. So, whatever it was, it was wonderful. But I really did want to get back to a much more literary kind of novel, so that's what I'm doing.

89 Paula L. Woods. My second Charlotte Justice mystery, Stormy Weather, will be published in August. I'm doing research on the third one in which I plan to take Charlotte to France. It is something that I actually started planning two years ago. I have always found the African American presence in France fascinating. The first time I was in Paris, I remember walking down the street and nodding to a black person in the way African Americans acknowledge each other (like saying: Hey, how are you doing? I see you. You see me. No one else in the world may see us but we see each other!), and he walked down the street as if he looked right through me. That spoke volumes about the differences between blacks in the U.S. and in France.

90 Having read Michel Fabre's From Harlem to Paris, I figure it would be interesting to take an African American woman who's fair-skinned, drop her in Paris and see what happens. That's what I am really thinking about now. In the course of her evolution, Charlotte is also on a personal arc; there are things that are going on in her life that are in the second book that will be developed further in the third. I think that's where I want to take her in terms of the third book. After that I'm kind of where Barbara is: I've got other things that I want to write but my publisher is saying: "You've got to give us at least three, so people can be satisfied for a while and give you some space." I'm sure my fellow panelists have heard that.

91 Barbara Neely. I don't listen... One always has a readership. I've said to my publisher: "Well, if I have to Xerox copies in great amount on the street corner, I will do that..." Gar?

92 Gar Haywood. I've just signed a two-book contract to write a couple of stand-alone thrillers, which means that they are not series books, they are independent of each other, that, I guess, would be best described as an Elmore Leonard type of ensemble pieces, crime novels where black people are actually central to the story. They are
protagonists in the story. We’ll see if there is a market for that sort of thing. I’m hoping there is.

NOTES

1. Editor’s note: Inter ethnic relations in Los Angeles are a prominent theme in Dirty Laundry (2003), the third novel in the Charlotte Justice series.
2. Editor’s note: Two books by Gar Haywood have come out under the pseudonym Ray Shannon: Man Eater (2003) and Firecracker (2004).
An Interview with Valerie Wilson Wesley

John Gruesser

The following interview took place in Valerie Wesley’s home in Montclair, New Jersey, on Wednesday May 7, 2003.

1 You were a professional writer long before you started to write detective fiction and you continue to write non-mystery books. Can you talk about the relationship between your Tamara Hayle series and your other novels and other writing projects?

2 Thank you for that question. What’s happened is, recently, I’ve developed a couple of different audiences and often the detective fans who like Tamara Hayle, don’t realize I write non-mysteries and the non-mystery people don’t realize I write the mysteries, so it’s always good when I have the two combined. I found that I needed to get out of the series because, although I love writing this character (and as I go back to her now it’s very enjoyable) the writing at some point becomes almost [too confining] because it’s a mystery and they’re almost by definition slightly formulaic: there’s a beginning, a middle, and there’s always at the end the denouement. There’s always the murder. It’s in the first person, so I see the world through Tamara’s eyes and walk in her footsteps. I found that I needed to get out of the series, and I needed to be able to write different characters and from different perspectives — male characters which I really enjoy doing — looking at the world in different ways from the detective. Detective fiction, crime fiction can be kind of a downer after a point, because you’re always writing about murder and in order to get into the characters’heads there’s a certain kind of sorrow in the book, and I wanted something dealing with a different subject, frankly. Ain’t Nobody’s Business If I Do dealt with marriage, and love, and lust, and Always True to You in My Fashion with the world of art and a guy who can’t be faithful to one woman. And the children’s novels, of course — the children’s series — is something that’s about children. I found that I have to do both types of fiction. That’s what really fulfills me. It’s a very interesting thing, and it’s a lot of work, but I do enjoy it. I have to do both. Sometimes readers want to know when the next [mystery’s] coming out. This is why so many writers switch series characters because you have to be able to bring a fresh eye to the character. You have to be able to come up with
different plots. If you write them one after the other, one after the other, one after the other, you just find yourself repeating yourself, and you never want to do that. You don’t grow when you just keep writing.

3 Why did you decide to write *When Death Comes Stealing*?

4 I really did want to create a different kind of character. It was a character who had not really been seen before. Certainly Barbara Neely and Eleanor Taylor Bland were doing really marvelous detective fiction featuring a black, female character — Walter Mosley with his incredible Easy Rawlins series — but I wanted to create a character who was a very empowered, very smart, savvy professional private detective. And also one that was a single mother because so many women were dealing with bringing up children by themselves. I was executive editor at *Essence* at that point. I really in so many ways had, as a magazine editor, my fingers on the pulse of what was happening in terms of contemporary black women. And I saw her, this character, as a chance to really talk about what’s happening in our community in terms of black women, in terms of black single mothers, and in terms of the things that women have to deal with. I think at the time that I was writing Tamara — that I began the series — I think the average salary of women was twenty-seven thousand, maybe less than that. I mean it’s not high for women. And if you have a kid and you have the various things that you’re dealing with as a single parent, there’s a lot of expense, a lot of worry, a lot of things. And despite all of that, many women do it splendidly, and I just wanted to show that.

5 Did you envision a whole series of Tamara Hayle novels from the start?

6 Yes, and I deliberately created characters that could go on in the series. When I sold it, I sold it as a series. Publishers tend to want you to do a series, and that was what I wanted to do. And in many ways I know where she’s going to be in twenty years. What’s interesting in coming back with the series after having written other novels is that I’ve found that every book is a little bit different. She grows in every book. She’s not the same Tamara in *The Devil Riding* as in *When Death Comes Stealing*. As I grow as a writer and as a person (I mean I’m ten years older) I bring different things to the book. I bring a different perspective because I’m older and Tamara is as well. In this latest book, because her kid, Jamal, will be going to college in two or three years (I never say exactly) I wanted to deal with the idea of loneliness in dealing with that, and love, and relationships, and how she feels about where her life is at this particular point. And she’s not really sure how she feels, and I wanted to show that, and many women aren’t, in their forties, late forties, or mid-forties. I never really say how old she is exactly because you never want to age your character out. But I’m dealing with, I think, lots of issues that women are dealing with.

7 You’ve already touched on this a little bit already, but I want to address this question to you. Most of your books involve multiple or serial murders, even though these occur less often than many people think. Is the pivotal position of murder in the mystery genre at all troubling to you?

8 I think — I read something once — that the reality is that it is of course the worst thing, the worst crime, to take another’s life, and it makes it all the more serious. You want a book that involves something serious, something that is worth, in a sense, going after. You could do a heist or something, but money is not murder. Murder means the death of a soul. The things that steer someone in that direction... A person who does such a thing has something so absolutely askew in who they are that it kind of makes for an interesting character. And I think it is the worst and that’s what you want to look at. It makes it worth the time to do it. It’s a matter of justice. Of course many murders aren’t
solved. And also that’s one of the reasons I wanted to get out of it — it took too much out of me, particularly *Easier to Kill* with that violent scene at the end — violent for me, not violent for other writers. I needed to get out, draw out for a while.

How consciously do you use — and subvert — the conventions of mystery writing, particularly those associated with white, male, tough-guy private eyes?

I just kind of take it and twist it. The classical thing with the barbershop or the bar — I do the beauty shop. I kind of paid my respects to Sue Grafton with Tamara’s Jetta. Of course her marvelous character Kinsey Millhone drives a Volkswagen Beetle. Tamara will, of course, in the new book, have a new Jetta. Everything. She’s tough in a way, but she’s not that tough. Her one vulnerability in a sense is that she is a parent, and that makes her more conscious of the threat that there is to her because he is an only child, the only one left in her family, basically. Everyone else is dead. He’s her link with the future and with the past. And that’s interesting and important to play with, too. I love John MacDonald. I love Travis McGee. I think that character is a marvelous character. I love that series. That’s one of my favorite series. I love how quickly it’s written, I love the language that’s so fast and fair and “dump, dump, dump,” I love the way, the honorable way he deals with life. And I try to give her those same qualities, as a black, female Travis McGee. Only he’s a little wilder than Tamara; he’s not married, but he certainly has that sense of justice, of making things right. That’s what I try to give her.

You’ve talked about how you’ve really made an effort to create, and obviously you’ve succeeded in creating, a tough guy — tough girl — black, female private eye. Do you ever feel compelled to gloss certain words or phrases for white readers, or is it up to them to do their own detective work and figure the meanings out from the context?

I just kind of write, and I think most folks understand the context. When you write, you just kind of write, and it just comes out, and you hope that folks get it. The books are published in Germany as well, which is interesting, and I think they must do fairly well over there because I get emails from German readers. It’s interesting for them to translate everything into their particular world. For example, in the latest book, *The Devil Riding* — the book is about runaways — they had a completely different title. If you want me to show you the copies, they’re very different kinds of books, and the titles are always very different from my titles. But I think that people can kind of figure out the context because the reality is there are certain universals that touch all of us, and that’s what you kind of aim for.

Who are your favorite authors of detective fiction? I saw that when you were younger Agatha Christie was a favorite. You’ve mentioned John MacDonald, you’ve mentioned Sue Grafton.

Ruth Rendell. P. D. James, certainly; P. D. James is incredible. Ruth Rendell, I love her work. Walter, of course. I think those are the main ones.

Do you see the mystery genre as being flexible enough to allow a writer to both entertain readers and make meaningful social commentary?

I think it has to be. That’s what you aim for. That’s why the genre’s important [because] it does go into social things. That’s why people read them. I think it has to be flexible enough, but at the same time you don’t want a book that’s boring because readers aren’t going to read it. You want to give them something, too, and I try to do that with some of Tamara’s observations about life and love and men and reality. And with certain characters like Wyvetta Green, who is, I think, a very interesting character. Everyone knows a Wyvetta Green. She’s just funny. And certainly in terms of black life, some of the
characters that you see [are ones] that we know. [In] every ethnic group there are certain people of a type. So those are a few of the humorous things, too, like a couple of, one or two, in-jokes. I can't think of any right off the bat. But it has to be flexible enough to encompass both things because the best mysteries do that. They are a comment, I think, on life, on what's happening politically and socially.

So it's fair to say that you consider your books to be political?

Well, in a sense, in a very subtle way, yeah. I mean I don't beat it over the [head]. Some are much more than others, I think. I think, for example, in No Hiding Place I was trying to really comment on the social —class. I do a lot with class, I think, more so maybe than politics as politics. And certainly with the family. As someone pointed out to me, actually recently—a critic—you know you write about family relationships. [They're] really what I write about — mothers and daughters, fathers and sons, and mothers and sons. And how the family is the first social unit: when that goes awry, how everything gets tampered with and nothing is right after that. And certainly I think with Easier to Kill I was really writing about, in some ways, abortion and infanticide, I guess. You do look at certain things. Yes, absolutely, because it's interesting and that's where it all comes from. If you're going to commit a murder, very often in a detective novel, it has something to do with other things than just wanting someone dead. Sometimes it doesn't. But are there other things at work? That's what I try to hit on.

I tend to prefer the first book in a mystery series because that's where the writer really establishes the character, but I also especially like When Death Comes Stealing because the plot turns on Tamara's role as a mother. How about you, do you have a favorite among the six Tamara Hayle books you've published so far?

I like No Hiding Place. I think that's a good one. And Easier to Kill, I think, is interesting because it's dealing with, again, mothers and children, and what happens when that particular thing goes [wrong]— and fathers, too, in a funny kind of way because the father is the one who killed, who did all the murders. I like When Death Comes Stealing. There's a lot of cursing in When Death Comes Stealing. Wow. But a lot of readers like that because of the tension of the children dying in that one. I think probably those three.

You've chosen to set your mysteries in a real place rather than a fictitious setting; however, instead of a larger and more glamorous city like New York, Washington, Chicago, or Los Angeles, most of your books take place in and around Newark, New Jersey. Why?

Well, there are a couple of reasons. One, I live near Newark, and it's easy to get in the car and go over and look at a spot. Richard's from Newark; my husband's from Newark. And I love Newark. I love it because it's tough, and it's trying to make its way in the world, and there are so many things against it. People always ask, "Why did you set it in Newark of all places?" But it's a city that's trying to get itself together. As I said in the first book, "It's like an old fighter who won't stay down for the count." It's a determined little city. It's a tough little city. And it's a port city—people forget it. But it's something about Newark. It's a gritty, tough city, but it also has a certain vulnerability and fragility that I like. People who come from Newark are very loyal to Newark. Very loyal. I try to give Tamara that thing and also Jake, of course, who grew up in Newark, and the sense of love for the city. That's why I chose the city.

You've already touched on this, so maybe this next question will take us a little bit further. Until very recently, the city had been in decline, since before World War II—with white flight, a shrinking tax base, inadequate and substandard housing, a high crime rate—and of course there were the
devastating effects of the 1967 riots, which you mention in nearly every book in the series. Yet you describe Newark as a “survivor city.” Why is this?

24 Well, I think it’s because it always depends upon the people who live there, who have a sense of optimism. I think NJPAC [The New Jersey Performing Arts Center] has certainly made a difference, and I mention that in Easier to Kill —no in No Hiding Place. And also neighborhoods that are holding on. I look at that a lot in No Hiding Place. The sense that there are certain places where they do hold on, they do maintain roots, and they are determined that they’re not going to be chased out. But also there’s a certain exploitation sometimes in the city, too. I mean people will take advantage of it. That goes for any city, I guess. A certain level of corruption. It’s a very corrupt little city. Not as bad as [some], but every small city is corrupt. You think about what’s happening now with Bridgeport, Connecticut, with the mayor. But I don’t think Sharpe James is that bad. I know he’s not that bad. It’s a manageable city. I think NJPAC is giving it a sense of rebirth. I’m on the Newark Arts Council, and we’re trying to do things with building an art space in the city. There’s a surprising number of young artists who live in Newark because they can’t afford New York—visual artists who are trying to make the city into something. Small things are happening in the city, and I think there is a sense of it coming back. In a different mold than it was maybe fifty years ago, but still coming back. Property rates are back up in Newark. They’re climbing. So it’s slowly, I think, beginning to reinvest in itself, and that’s interesting.

25 How consciously have you linked Tamara, a survivor herself, to her hometown?

26 Well, I think I’m going to do it more. The question is a good one. I think she identifies with the city because of that, and I think in the new book I mention it a little bit. It hasn’t been that conscious, really, but as the series grows and I grow I think I’m going to be doing it more. Sometimes you write and you don’t know why you do stuff, which is very odd. You’ll write it down and then someone will say, “You know you’ve done this in this book and you’ve done that,” and you say, “Wow, that’s interesting.” I guess writing is very subconscious in a funny kind of way. You just write and you don’t know what you’re doing, but you’re right: she is like the city. Perhaps I did say it in one book, but I don’t remember it.

27 People from elsewhere in Essex County and beyond, as you were saying, may associate Newark with corruption, also crime, and poverty. However, at least for Tamara, the city often stands for the opposite —family, tradition, and moral clarity— while rich mostly white suburbs like the fictitious Belvington Heights, where your protagonist worked for five years as a cop, are fraught with dangers, particularly for African Americans. Is Belvington Heights based on a real place?

28 Not really, except I guess you could say it’s similar —the cops— to Montclair. There’s always a certain tension. Not so much now. Certainly ten years ago, even in Montclair. My husband, for example, was sitting outside the house and the cops—this was years ago—the cops thought he was trying to rob the house. It was horrible. They made him come in. It was horrible. Anyway, that’s always a threat when you’re a black person in a predominantly white neighborhood or a neighborhood that’s seen as an upscale neighborhood. And Belvington Heights is much richer than Montclair. It’s more like, I guess, Short Hills, more exclusive than Montclair. And it’s true, there is a threat to black people many times. You’re just walking down the street, and they think you’re robbing something. And, for example, in Devil’s Gonna Get Him when the chef moves his restaurant from Newark to Belvington Heights, that’s a statement that I wanted to make about people moving the business out of a place like Newark, which it really is benefiting, into
Belvington Heights. When Tanya gets it, she moves it back to Newark. So it becomes a symbol of affluence that people aspire to but often aren’t included in. That’s what Belvington Heights is. A lot of bad stuff happens in Belvington Heights. You’re right. Poor Belvington Heights.

29 The third book in the series, Where Evil Sleeps, took Tamara to Jamaica, and The Devil Riding, was set mainly in Atlantic City. Will the next book be set in Newark?

30 Yeah. Probably from now on I’m going to be setting them in Newark. There’s not the need as much, since I’m writing other books, to set it in different settings. I can focus now on Newark. Yeah, they’re probably going to all be set in Newark. I wanted to look at a different thing. Atlantic City—I wanted to bring Basil Dupre back and not bring him back in Newark. They’ll probably be set in Newark.

31 What were your impressions of the recent Newark mayoral contest between four-time incumbent Sharpe James and the up-and-coming Cory Booker?

32 That’s an interesting question because I think it’s something I might like to use in a book at some point: old Newark vs. new Newark, the political [types] vs. the middle class... There are a lot of things happening in Newark. I don’t try to do it in this book, but I think at some point I’d like to. I thought it was an interesting race. Although Cory Booker was an interesting candidate, he didn’t have quite the base. I think he would have done some very good things for Newark. But unfortunately most of his supporters—most of the money supporting him—didn’t come from Newark. And that’s not a good thing when a candidate is running and no one from Newark supports [him]. He’s seen—but he may not be—as an agent for change that doesn’t exist in Newark. What’s the guy’s name? Will, I forget his first name—terribly conservative guy—George Will came out with a column for him. What a way to block a young black politician’s life. George Will, who is like the worst conservative you ever want to see, and has said horrible things about people, black people in Newark. I mean who wants him in his camp? So that kind of thing, I think, undermined his campaign. I had to look twice when George Will was supporting him. Then again a lot of people supported him whom I respect, but they didn’t live in Newark. They all lived in Montclair. So, again, it’s like what’s going on here? I don’t know, I don’t know what to think about it. It was an interesting campaign, I thought.

33 You’ve indicated that you’re optimistic about what lies ahead for Newark. Is Jamal in any way intended to be symbolic of the future of the city?

34 I think he could be. I think absolutely. He’s on his way to college at some point. And I think if the series goes on and on and on, at some point he may work with his mother, in some kind of a different capacity, which would be interesting. A different type of relationship. That will be so many books down the line. Yeah, I think so, but he’s also—and I also deal with this—the older he gets the more he’s threatened by growing up a young, black male in Newark, because there’s death. I mean you can walk down the street and someone can shoot you. There’s gangs. Gangs are coming back. They’ve always been there, but gangs are back. I think the Bloods and the Crips are back. There’s always an element of danger. That’s true in every city. A mother raising a son has to be aware of that. And it’s very scary that your child could be threatened. Yeah, but I think in some ways he is the hope, as children always are.

35 You yourself have two daughters. Why did you choose to give Tamara a son?

36 I don’t think I was really ready to write about mothers and daughters yet. It’s a different kind of relationship, but now my daughters are grown. And I’m actually going to do
mothers and daughters in other books. I did mothers and daughters a little bit in *Ain’t Nobody’s Business If I Do*. I think she may adopt a daughter when Jamal goes away to school. And that will give me a chance to look at not only mothers and daughters but adopting a child and bringing up a child. And a child who is a troubled child, and a daughter. And I think that would be an interesting thing to really explore because that’s a far different parenting experience and a very important one. And again many single women do adopt children. And I also in this next book am going to bring a more permanent relationship in, but he won’t stay around for more than one or two books. I want to do something with her idea of aging, and wanting to settle down with a man again, and a little bit on marriage. But she may or may not marry. I don’t know. But again it’s looking at it and then leaving it so she’s back where she was. These are all new things that I’m toying with for this next book.

37 What’s distinctive about Tamara is that she is a private investigator and a mother, a single mother. Yet she’s very sexual, too, although in no way is she casual about sex despite her strong attraction for Basil. Can you comment on this?

38 I think people like reading about relationships, and it is an important part of people’s lives. I mean, single women have boyfriends, and Tamara does, too. I wanted to make her a whole woman, not just a mother, not just a businesswoman, not just a P.I., but a total person. And I wanted to talk about that aspect of women’s lives—men. So that was the reason. I didn’t want her to be kind of an asexual, nonsexual [character]. She’s a woman, an attractive woman, who’s also concerned about looks and growing older and age and gaining weight and stuff that concerns women.

39 And men.

40 And men. And that’s part of being human, and I wanted to give her that human dimension.

41 Although set in the North, ancestral Southern roots and values figure prominently in your books through Tamara’s grandmother, a baker from down South who raised Tamara more than her mother did and whose folk wisdom the detective often draws upon for strength and guidance. Can you talk about this woman’s importance to Tamara?

42 Well, I think that her grandmother, again, is someone who does bring a sense of continuity with the South. Black communities have roots in the South. I mean, you came from somewhere, and it’s the South. In terms of immigrant people from different countries coming to Newark, it’s a town of immigrants, a city of immigrants. People from the South came to Newark. And I wanted to talk about that aspect of black culture and black family life. And her grandmother did rear her because her mother was abusive in many ways, and her father was kind of a drunk, and her family was just kind of scrambled. But the grandmother was the main root of her life. The mainstay.

43 Tamara was the person who found her brother Johnny’s body and his death caused her to enter into a bad marriage at a young age and later to go into law enforcement. Does she know why he committed suicide and will this story ever appear in one of your novels?

44 I don’t know because the reality is you never know why someone commits suicide. Not really. If they’re depressed (I may talk about depression at some point) you never really know. It’s such an awful legacy because there’s a mystery to it. And that question I’ve been asked a lot by readers. Also a lot of readers have told me that they’re happy that I talk about it. This one woman in particular (I got a very moving letter) her brother also committed suicide. She was grateful to me for writing about it because she sees that
Tamara has gotten through it so she knows that she will, which always makes you feel good as a writer. I'm not sure why he committed suicide myself. But I think at some point I may look into it more, but probably more [in terms of] depression and deal with it as that. But that's a ways down the line as well—one of the mysteries of Tamara’s life.

45 Will we ever learn more about Tamara’s abusive mother about whom she harbors extremely mixed feelings?

46 Probably when I explore mothers more. It could be when I bring in that daughter; maybe I’ll explore more about it then. I don’t know. Probably. If it works into the story’s line, yeah. When you develop a character like that, there’s always something you want to look at in terms of the story itself, and that’s when you bring in the information that made the character who she is. So at some point I might look at it more.

47 Let me just add a question here about your writing process. You’re clearly planning books ahead in terms of things you want to do. How about with an individual book? Do you really plot the thing out very carefully?

48 Absolutely. Yeah. I find that with mysteries I have to because there’s a certain rhythm to them and I have to have a sense that something’s going to happen in a chapter. I have to have clues and I have to know when a character reveals something. So they’re plotted out in much more detail than the other novels, which also have an outline, a broader outline. But I really have to be much more exact so I know when clues are going to happen, I know when a piece of information is revealed, because it falls into the way she solves the crime. A lot of writers say, “I don’t use an outline”—mystery writers. But I absolutely have to with mysteries because they’re very plotted. Mysteries—this particular genre—they’re plot-based in many ways. I hope mine are also character-based. But they’re much more so than regular novels. They’re plot based: boom, boom, boom, boom, boom. And they have to make sense at the end. I do outline.

49 What’s next for Tamara and for Jamal, who must be nearly eighteen by now?

50 Well, in the book I’m working on right now, as I said, she’s beginning to think in terms of college —he is. She’s beginning to think in terms of being alone in the house —kind of empty nest syndrome. She’s beginning to understand that her life is in transition and that brings with it some sense of sorrow but also of being free. But at the same time as I grow older there are other questions that confront me in my life that I will probably bring to the series in some way. For me writing the series is fun because of that, but, like I said, I have to come out of it every now and then. Otherwise, it just gets, ahhhhh, tedious. She will, certainly, be back. Actually, the other books have outsold the series because mystery fans aren’t as large a base as other readers. And I’ve had to, actually, go to a different publishing house because my main publisher really wanted me to focus on just writing non-mysteries. But I found that there was such a hue and cry among readers —“When’s the next one coming out?”—that I really did decide to write another Tamara Hayle, and I am doing that now, and then I’ll do the next novel. I was surprised when I heard that because I always assumed that Tamara Hayles were selling, but, as someone observed, many people take it from the library or trade them back and forth because the other books definitely outsell them in terms of just bulk sales. Mystery’s a niche market. It’s considered a niche market unless you’re making the best seller list, unless you’ve broken up and broken over and gone into big [time] like some of the other mystery writers. I haven’t done that. I think my readership is primarily smaller. But who knows with the next book.
And the last question is: what’s next for Valerie Wilson Wesley?

Well, I am working on a new Tamara Hayle. I have a new series—children’s series—called Willimena Rules. Because I happen to have it here, I’ll show you the galley. And I’m working on a new stand alone novel, which I’m very excited about, about mothers and daughters, and infidelity, and murder. It’s not a Tamara Hayle, but it’s definitely, I think, a very interesting study. And this new novel I’ll be working on after I finish this Tamara Hayle is actually the first time I’m really going to be writing about mothers and daughters—and I’m looking forward to getting into that book—I haven’t for some reason. My mother was not abusive. She was a lovely woman. She would be appalled at all these awful women—mothers—running through my books. I think because my own daughters are grown and the whole relationship is becoming much more in focus for me—so I’m very excited about writing that new book. But also the new Tamara Hayle, which I think readers are going to enjoy.

NOTES

2. Valerie Wesley’s seventh Tamara Hayle novel, Dying in the Dark, appeared in 2004. She is currently at work on the eighth novel in the series, which will feature the return of the character Lilah Love.

ABSTRACTS

This interview covers the Tamara Hayle series, as well as the non-detective fiction Valerie Wilson Wesley is writing.

AUTHOR

JOHN GRIESSER

Professor of English at Kean University, New Jersey. He is the author of three books, including Confluences: Postcolonialism African American Literary Studies, and The Black Atlantic (University of Georgia Press, 2005). He also edited The Unruly Voice: Rediscovering Pauline Elizabeth Hopkins (Illinois, 1996) and The Black Sleuth by John Edward Bruce (Northeastern, 2002).
Auteurs par ordre alphabétique.  
Authors in alphabetical order

1  **Yves Bonnemère** has studied English as well as African anthropology. This was followed by degrees in sociology (General, Social and Tropical Africa). His Ph. D., *History and Culture in Ishmael Reed's Novels* was defended in 1983 (Sorbonne). His involvement in African-American studies has been pursued through scholarly work published in a number of journals such as “Hoodoo as a Metaphor of migration in *Mumbo Jumbo*” (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2000), or a recent study of Percival Everett’s *God’s Country* due out soon.


3  **Françoise Clary** is a Professor at Université de Rouen. A contributor to *American Literary Scholarship* (Duke University), she is the author of *L'Espoir de vivre*, a study of the African American novel from Chester Himes to Hal Bennett, of *Jean Toomer*, a close study of *Cane*, of various articles on African American literature, racial Christianity, African American Islam and Affirmative Action. She has edited *Black American Stories*. She is a co-editor with Claude Julien of *Jean Toomer and the Harlem Renaissance* and, with Michel Fabre, of a new translation of Himes’s *A Case of Rape*.

4  **Mary Condé** has taught in the U. S. at the University of Vermont, then at the University of Leicester, U. K. She now is a Senior Lecturer in English at Queen Mary, University of London. She is co-editor with Thorunn Lonsdale of *Caribbean Women Writers: Fiction in English* (Macmillan, 1999), and her research interests are in the short story, African American women’s fiction and contemporary Canadian women’s fiction.

5  **Norlisha F. Crawford** has recently joined the staff of the University of Wisconsin, Oshkosh, as Assistant Professor, English and Director of the African-American Studies Program. Upcoming published essays include “The Good, the Bad and the Beautiful: Chester Himes’s Femmes and their Work in his Harlem”, in *The National Women's Studies Association Journal*. 
NICOLE DÉCURÉ teaches English as a foreign language to science students at Toulouse III University. She is the head of a research team concerned with language learning and teaching. She has published extensively in this domain but also in the field of feminist literature and more especially crime fiction.

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CLAUDE JULIEN teaches American Studies at Université François-Rabelais de Tours. He is the author of a Thèse de Doctorat d’Etat on childhood and adolescence in African American fiction, 1853-1969. A founding member of CEAA and a member of CAAR, he has contributed a number of papers on the African American literary and social fields. He has co-edited a collection of essays on Cane. He has recently edited a GRAAT journal celebrating Michel Fabre as well as a Callaloo number on John Wideman. He is currently preparing a collection of essays on Percival Everett.

ALICE MILLS is an Associate Professor at the University of Caen. Her work on Afro American literature has been published by the Presses Universitaires de Caen, Presses de la Sorbonne, R.F.E.A., P.A.L.A.R.A. (University of Missouri Columbia, Pennsylvania State University), Journal of Haitian Studies (UC Santa Barbara), The Black Scholar and an anthology of the Indian Chapter of M.E.L.U.S. (University of Calcutta, University of Delhi, University of Chandigarh.)

ANNE-MARIE PAQUET-DEYRIS has taught at Harvard and Université de Lille. She currently is a professor at Université de Rouen. A specialist of Afro-American literature and culture, she wrote her dissertation on Toni Morrison. A 1996 book, Toni Morrison: figures de femmes, was published by the Sorbonne Univ. Press. She is also the author of numerous articles on cinema and the adaptation of literary sources to the screen.

DANIEL PELTZMAN is Associate Professor of American studies at Université de Franche-Comté, in Besançon. He received his Ph. D. from Université de Paris VII, Denis Diderot. He has published a series of articles on the antiCommunist Witch Hunt and Hollywood labor organizations. He is currently at work on a book about the Conference of Studio Unions, 1941-1948.
ROUND TABLE DISCUSSION: Paula L. Woods, Gar Anthony Haywood, Barbara Neely and some participants

STEPHEN F. SOITOS is the author of The Blues Detective. A Study of African American Detective Fiction. This book has won a Popular Culture Association award and American Library Choice Award. He worked with James Baldwin at the University of Massachusetts. He has also published many essays on African American literature and culture including pieces on Zora Neale Hurston, Chester Himes, Clarence Major and a complete analysis of African American art.
Résumés par ordre de publication.
Summaries as they appear in the volume

1 **STEPHEN SOITOS:** *Surveying the Genre*

This essay aims to outline the evolution of Afro-American detective fiction by looking at a few pivotal moments. The founders of the genre who wrote immediately introduced “detectives” that were close to Afro-American, even African grass roots... Although he did not bring Harlem into black detective fiction (Fisher did that), Himes can be considered as the founder of the modern black genre. Many in this prolific field have followed his lead that interestingly came into being at the request of Marcel Duhamel, the director of the Gallimard “Série Noire”.

2 **MARY CONDÉ:** “The almost bitter murmur” in *Rudolph Fisher’s The Conjure Man Dies*

Rudolph Fisher, in *The Conjure Man Dies* (1932), does not treat the traditional African American motif of passing, although he does treat disguise. Very unusually for a text of this period, he manages to integrate a highly developed degree of African American consciousness into a very accomplished detective story.

3 **YVES BONNEMÈRE:** *Ishmael Reed’s Use of Detective Novel Prototypes*

Ishmael Reed uses detective novel prototypes to debunk white men’s “superiority”. Gang warfare depicts an age-old worldwide fight between polytheism and monotheism. Based on the founding myth of ancient Egypt, white men are portrayed as the heirs of Seth, an animal-like god, whereas black men resemble Osiris, Seth’s brother, the anthropomorphic god. Reversing the stereotypes attached to Ham’s sons, Reed turns white men into the members of an accursed family, forever doomed to depravity and perversity.

4 **FRANÇOISE CLARY:** *Dismantling the Detective Story: Chester Himes’s Ideological Stand in A Case of Rape*

In *A Case of Rape*, Chester Himes uses the crime story pattern to investigate human personality. Employing the logico-temporal gap as a key device in the production of suspense, Himes explores the springs of crime. But there is more to the novel than suspense: also shown is the violence that simmers behind the bland faces of people...
present to the world. The aim of this paper is to examine the African-American novelist’s two dimensional mode of perception, an ontological way to stand apart from conventional categories in a detective story that takes color from its social environment while imparting it a further layer of meaning.

NORLISHA F. CRAWFORD: The South as a Literary Space in Hard-Boiled African-American Detective Fiction: Challenging Images that Persist and Matter in U.S. Culture

Southern African Americans have had a profound influence on national cultural in the United States. And yet, they remain among the most disparaged of all citizens. Chester Himes chose to create the backgrounds of many of his most ambitious Harlem characters in the American South. Himes creates transplanted Southern black characters that are dynamic, creative, master manipulators of their circumstances—thereby challenging stereotypical perceptions.


Chester Himes’s novel A Rage in Harlem, published in 1957 in the U.S. as For Love of Imabelle, was adapted in 1991 by Black actor Bill Duke. As he said in some interviews, it was a true challenge to work on one of Himes’s books because of his love of meticulously described characters, his extremely compact writing and his style hovering between intense emotion and swift humor. The film may not be a first-rate one but its selection of flamboyant characters and of specific sections of the plot, as well as its parody of the western genre and reminiscences of Broadway musicals somehow modify the canon of the detective film.

DOMINIQUE CHANCE: Solibo Magnifique: dans la mangrove policière

Le roman de Patrick Chamoiseau, Solibo Magnifique, dépasse les clivages postcoloniaux entre un petit peuple opprimé et une police terrifiante. Il nous entraîne dans une « mangrove policière », un milieu hybride et contradictoire, aussi bien d’un point de vue linguistique qu’idéologique. La « créolité » élabore ses symboles dans un récit qui transgresse les limites morales et politiques pour dépeindre une société mosaïque, populaire et vivante.

CLAUDE JULIEN: Gunner Country: Gar Anthony Haywood’s Fictional World

During the round table discussion held at Tours in 2001, Gar Haywood pointed out he began writing with the intent to portray the Los Angeles that was never shown in white detective fictions, to take his stories away from glamorous places into the squalor of South Central. The essay proposes to look at that locale, Gunner’s existential cityscape. The picture does evolve over time, as the tone of voice sheds its early gallows humor to become more sedate. You Can Die Trying may be the pivotal work in this respect. Still, overall, the series portrays a disjointed world under the reign of absurdity and violence.

JOHN C. GRUESSER: Valerie Wesley’s Tamara Hayle and Newark’s Past, Present and Future

The turbulent history of Newark, New Jersey plays a prominent role in the seven novels of Valerie Wilson Wesley’s Tamara Hayle series. Three generations of the detective’s family represent the city’s past, present, and future; her hometown serves as the repository for her own memories and values; and specific locations in and around Newark symbolize the past and present lives of several characters.
FRANÇOISE DÉCURÉ: “HOW Are You Doing with Your Pain?” Violence in Black Women’s Crime Fiction

Black women’s crime fiction is a literature of empathy, denunciation, anger and commitment. The authors write from a double perspective: women as targets both of male violence and of racial and racist violence. This article examines the motives for killing used in this fiction, the place of the woman detective and the suffering caused by the various forms of violence.

ALICE MILLS: Easy Rawlins and Blanche White: the Limits of Critical Models

This paper examines different aspects of Walter Mosley and Barbara Neely’s writings whose complexity sometimes has difficulty fitting into the mold of literary theories on black detective fiction. It argues that the layer of ambivalence in Mosley and Neely’s novels on issues of blackness, gender and social class may appear negative from an ideological point of view, but that this very ambivalence is what makes the characters true literary figures and not merely one-dimensional ideological vehicles.

ALISON D. GOELLER: Identity Politics: the Private Eye/I in Walter Mosley’s Detective Fiction

Mosley’s Easy Rawlins series follows the hard-boiled tradition but also shares with much ethnic fiction strategies for exposing social and economic disparities in the U.S. Crime thus becomes a metaphor for all that is wrong in America, a vehicle for critiquing injustice based on racial discrimination.

Moreover, Mosley’s reluctant sleuth is also engaged in a more important mystery: who he is and where he wants to be in a society that does not value him, a society that makes black men invisible second class citizens. Easy’s personal identity, constantly negotiated and challenged, is the biggest mystery of all, and cracking that mystery becomes the most intriguing aspect of the series. As Roger Berger has argued, Mosley himself is highly ambivalent about his identity as a writer of hard-boiled fiction.

DANIEL PELTZMAN: Of Race and the Witch Hunt in Walter Mosley’s A Red Death

The Easy Rawlins series covers three decades of from the late 1940s to the mid-1960s. A Red Death is perhaps the most political of all as it focuses on the effects of the McCarthy witch hunt. The essay argues that the period’s deleterious atmosphere ruined solidarity among the oppressed, while black political activists advocating an exodus from the US were fighting the wrong fight. The unmentioned stirrings of the civil rights campaign suggests that black political apathy was strong.

GÉRARD DELÉCHELLE: “It’s always a little piece of language that sets off a novel”: a Linguistic Analysis of the Opening of Walter Mosley’s White Butterfly

A linear linguistic analysis of the opening chapter of White Butterfly shows how the atmosphere of the novel is gradually created with the presentation of the reluctant Easy Rawlins and his relationships with the police (black and white). The study of this short chapter also reveals some of the characteristics of Mosley’s writing.

Paula L. Woods, Barbara Neely and Gar A. Haywood: The Tours Symposium Round Table

The three novelists present their development as writers and the aims they pursue. They answer questions from the floor.

JOHN C. GRUESSEER: An Interview with Valerie Wilson Wesley

This interview covers the Tamara Hayle series, as well as the non-detective fiction Valerie Wilson Wesley is writing.