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“Polar noir”: Reading African-American Detective Fiction

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Round Table Discussion: Paula Woods, Gar Haywood, BarbaraNeely 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...*
- 3 **Paula L. Woods.** My name is Paula Woods. I am the author of one published novel thus far, *Inner City Blues*, which was published in 1999, and in paperback in 2000. My second novel, *Stormy Weather*, will be published in August 2001. However, my interest in African American detective fiction goes back much further. I guess you could say I grew up sleuthing for African American detective fiction.
- 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, BarbaraNeely 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.

- 10 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."
- 11 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. [...]
- 12 **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.
- 13 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 [laughter]... 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.

- 14 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.
- 15 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.
- 16 **BarbaraNeely.** My name is BarbaraNeely. 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.
- 19 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?
- 20 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...
- 21 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.
- 22 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!
- 23 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.
- 24 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.
- 25 **Paula L. Woods.** Were you thinking of a place like Oak Bluffs?
- 26 **BarbaraNeely.** 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.
- 27 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.]

- 28 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 interesting 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. [...]
- 29 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 Steinern, 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".
- 30 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!"
- 31 **Gar Haywood.** Was that intentional in the first book, or did it simply happen that way?

- 32 **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.
- 33 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.
- 34 **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...
- 35 **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 Hirnes 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.

- 36 **BarbaraNeely.** 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.
- 37 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.
- 38 **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 “sadtitty” as in “sadtitty 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!”
- 39 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.

- 40 Jim Nesbitt, a San Francisco mystery writer, said in a conference last year that murder is a serious thing and writing about it 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.
- 41 **BarbaraNeely.** 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 it'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.
- 42 **Alice Mills (Université de Caen):** *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?*
- 43 **BarbaraNeely.** 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...
- 44 **Paula L. Woods.** 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 **Norlisha 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 **BarbaraNeely.** 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 **BarbaraNeely.** 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 onomastics: 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 **BarbaraNeely.** 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 **BarbaraNeely.** 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 **BarbaraNeely.** 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?*
- 60 **BarbaraNeely.** 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.
- 61 **Claudine Raynaud:** *Do you deal in your novels with inter-ethnic relations, between the Black and the Hispanic communities for instance?*
- 62 **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.¹
- 63 **BarbaraNeely.** 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...
- 64 **Alice Mills:** *Are there times when you refrain from expressing your ideas?*
- 65 **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.

- 66 **BarbaraNeely.** 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...
- 67 **Gar Haywood.** Yeah, yeah. Exactly...
- 68 **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.
- 69 **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?*
- 70 **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.
- 71 **BarbaraNeely.** 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.
- 72 **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.
- 73 **G rard Del chelle (Universit  de Tours):** *Don't you sometimes run across characters who go out of control?*
- 74 **BarbaraNeely.** 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.
- 75 **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.

- 76 **BarbaraNeely.** But, of course, you know that story.
- 77 **Gar Haywood.** That's right.
- 78 **BarbaraNeely.** 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.
- 79 **Paula L. Woods.** The dynamics of her life?
- 80 **BarbaraNeely.** 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.
- 81 **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?
- 82 **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.*
- 83 **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.
- 84 **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.
- 85 **BarbaraNeely.** 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.
- 86 **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 **BarbaraNeely.** 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 **BarbaraNeely.** 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,² 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).