AN EXPLORATION OF THE ROLE OF THE DETECTIVE FIGURE IN 20TH CENTURY AFRICAN AMERICAN CRIME FICTION

by

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Abstract

This thesis examines the role of the detective figure in African American crime fiction, and how this changed throughout the 20th Century. The role of this character changed as the genre became politicized and used by African American writers as a space for social critique. The detective took on a new responsibility, as a representation of the African American community, and mouthpiece for real-world concerns and issues. Crime writers achieved this using a range of methods - from the subversive anti-detective novel tradition, to the discussion of W.E.B DuBois' theory of 'double consciousness', to utilizing elements of the popular pulp fiction trend, to choosing historically black settings such as Harlem as backdrops for their stories. This thesis ends with the assertion that the detective figure within African American crime fiction was assigned a new role as they became inspiring symbols for a frustrated community of people.

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Introduction

In *A Companion to Crime Fiction*, Stephen Soitos reflects on the evolution of the detective figure within the African American crime fiction genre, and how the role of the detective grew far beyond solving 'just a literary puzzle or game'.[1] The crime genre shifted throughout the 20th century, becoming politicized as the focus moved away from a fictional crime to a discussion of real-world issues. African American novelists such as Chester Himes and Walter Mosley wrote during a period of transformation in American history and found a space to voice their concerns and frustrations in this 'new variation of the detective form'.[2] Beneath these stories about crimes there is a glimpse into the lives of African Americans, people that were typically not cast as protagonists or heroes within American literature. Writers used their protagonists to discuss topics ranging from violent stereotypes within the African American community, to treatment of African American women, to housing inequality, to the corrupt American justice system. A variety of techniques were used to focus the attention of the reader onto the authors underlying political discussion – references to double consciousness, the anti-detective tradition, the use of setting as a backdrop for stories about African American lives – and the role of the detective figure took on an educational, journalistic quality. In this dissertation, I will explore the role of the detective figure in 20th century African American crime fiction, and how this character allowed the genre to act as social critique. I have chosen to focus on the works of four African American crime writers: Ann Petry, Chester Himes, Walter Mosley and Barbara Neely.

[1] Stephen Soitos, 'Chester Himes (1904 – 1984)', in *A Companion to Crime Fiction*, (Oxford, United Kingdom: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2010), pp. 475-486 (p. 477).
[2] Stephen Soitos, *The Blues Detective: A Study of African American Detective Fiction*, (Amherst: The University of Massachussetts Press, 1996), p. 3

Each of these writers uses their own methods to achieve the same goal – to produce a compelling social commentary under the guise of a crime novel. Brooks Hefner names this 'pleasure-as-politics' fiction, where writers discuss politics within their novels seemingly written as light entertainment.[3] In this thesis, I have dedicated a chapter to each of these four writers and explain the techniques that they each utilize tropes of the crime fiction genre with the intention of forming a social critique. Ann Petry uses the anti-detective tradition and elements of pulp fiction to make her writing more appealing to the masses; Chester Himes uses violence and sexual imagery to sensationalize his stories centred around despondent African American protagonists; Walter Mosley uses Easy Rawlins to offer a first-hand insight into the corrupt and institutionally racist American justice system and also gives a voice to African American women that choose to pass for white; and finally Barbara Neely uses a domestic worker, Blanche Lam, to shed a new perspective on the mammy figure, and the use of gossip as an investigative tool. Beneath these stories centred around crime, African American writers used the crime fiction genre as a space to voice their frustrations and concerns, and these four authors are a small cross-section of a large and important literary tradition.

In his 1996 study, *The Blues Detective: A Study of African American Detective Fiction*, Soitos isolates four 'tropes of black detection', a criteria that I will use in this dissertation to define a black detective figure.[4] First, the 'detective persona', the detective figure's 'identity is directly connected to community' and racial politics is 'primary in any case' that they take on.[5] Second,

[3] Brooks Hefner, *Black Pulp: Genre Fiction in the Shadow of Jim Crow,* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2021), p. 7
[4] Soitos, *The Blues Detective: A Study of African American Detective Fiction*, p. 27
[5] Soitos, *The Blues Detective: A Study of African American Detective Fiction*, p. 27

the detective is aware of their double-consciousness as an African American – this may be represented by role-playing, disguises or adopting a 'trickster' persona.[6] Then, there is what Soitos refers to as 'blackground', or reference to 'black vernaculars' such as black music, black language or black cuisine.[7] Finally, the use of 'hoodoo' or an expression of black religion or belief systems.[8] These characteristics differentiate the African American detective figure from their white counterparts, and alter their role within the narrative.

In this thesis, my argument is supported by a range of scholarship on African American literature. Maureen Reddy's *Traces, Codes and Clues: Reading Race in Crime Fiction* explains the use of setting as a literary device in African American literature, and writes that a Harlem black detective figure must be 'tough enough to confront the lawlessness of mobs'.[9] Andrew Pepper's *The Contemporary American Crime Novel: Race, Ethnicity, Gender, Class* offers a brief history of the African American crime genre, and how this evolved to cater to a market that craved violence in post-World War II America. Daylanne K. English's 'The Modern in the Postmodern: Walter Mosley, Barbara Neely, and the Politics of Contemporary African-American Detective Fiction' is an important essay on the black detective figure, and the value behind examining race and class from the perspective of a working-class black character. Alison D. Goeller's chapter in *Polar Noir: Reading African-American Detective Fiction,* titled 'Identity Politics: The Private Eye ("I") in Walter Mosley's Detective Fiction' is a useful summary of the history of the black detective figure and their relation to the American justice system, all too often forced to carry out their work without formal recognition. Manning Marable, W.E.B

[6] Soitos, *The Blues Detective: A Study of African American Detective Fiction*, p. 27
[7] Soitos, *The Blues Detective: A Study of African American Detective Fiction*, p. 27
[8] Soitos, *The Blues Detective: A Study of African American Detective Fiction*, p. 27
[9] Maureen Reddy, 'Race and American Crime Fiction', in *The Cambridge Companion to American Crime Fiction*, ed Catherine Ross Nickerson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 135-147, p. 137

DuBois' biographer, wrote a book titled *Race, Reform, and Rebellion: The Second Reconstruction and Beyond in Black America, 1945-2006,* which offers an updated insight into DuBois' theory of double consciousness and is a valuable companion to my study of African American literature. Similarly, Sean McCann's *The Cambridge Companion to American Crime Fiction* offers an in-depth explanation of the history of pulp fiction and how the tropes of the crime genre have been subverted and adapted by modern writers, 'adapting the conventions of the genre to craft an account of the segregated life of Harlem'.[10]

'Double-consciousness' is a term that I use throughout this thesis, and is a phrase that was first used by W.E.B. DuBois in a 1903 collection of essays titled *The Souls of Black Folk*.[11] DuBois uses this phrase to describe the experience of an African American 'always looking at oneself through the eyes' of a systematically racist society and understanding that they are a victim of racial discrimination.[12] DuBois argues that African Americans exist on a secondary plane of consciousness that their white peers do not, comparing this to being 'cursed': 'one ever feels his twoness, -an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals'.[13] Patricia Collins describes a dual consciousness as existing within a different reality entirely: 'a subordinate group not only experiences a different reality than a group that rules, but a subordinate group may interpret that reality differently than a dominant group'.[14] This principle offered a new explanation of the discrimination that African Americans experienced, sent shockwaves through the community and inspired countless artists in the

[10] Sean McCann, *The Cambridge Companion to American Crime Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 55
[11] W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, (Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 136
[12] DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, p. 8
[13] DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, p. 13
[14] Patricia Collins, 'The Social Construction of Black Feminist Thought', *Common Grounds and Crossroads: Race, Ethnicity, and Class in Women's Lives*, 14:4, (1989), 745-773, p. 748

century that followed. DuBois' 1903 essay sparked a conversation among novelists, essayists, critics and journalists, inspiring works such as Frantz Fanon's 1952 novel *Black Skin White Masks* and a later study by Paul Gilroy in 1993 titled *Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness.* Stories such as Ann Petry's *The Street* (1946) depict a protagonist undergoing a period of self-discovery and eventually arriving at a state of double consciousness whilst others, such as Barbara Neely's Blanche White series, depict a protagonist that is fully aware of their double consciousness from the outset and uses this insight to their advantage. It is her acute awareness of her own double consciousness allows Blanche to manipulate her white employers, using her invisibility as a tool to carry out her investigations covertly. Similarly, in The Harlem Cycle novels that Himes is best known for, a pair of Harlem detectives, Jones and Johnson, use their race as a tool to access spaces that their white counterparts are unable to. This aids their investigation and gives them an edge as private detectives. In *The Blues Detective*, Stephen Soitos argues that these characters allowed the genre to take on an educational quality, designed to offer readers insight into the African American worldview, a 'world filtered through two levels of consciousness'.[15] Soitos argues that the 'filter' of race, or the second plane of consciousness, changes the worldview of African Americans irreversibly once they are shown it, resulting in 'a fractured worldview for black Americans'.[16] In this dissertation, I will discuss the use of a double conscious detective figure became a recurring feature within African American crime fiction, and how this trend served to politicise the genre.

The anti-detective novel was another notable trend in African American crime fiction, used as a re-focus stories around social criticism, rather than the crime itself. These stories obey the basic

[15] Soitos, *The Blues Dective: A Study of African American Detective Fiction*, p. 33
[16] Soitos, *The Blues Dective: A Study of African American Detective Fiction*, p. 34

rules of the crime novel – a detective figure, a crime, an investigation – but in the anti-detective novel the boundaries of this rigid genre are blurred and left open to the reader's interpretation. Stefano Tani describes a trend in the American crime fiction genre following the Second World War as 'novelists taking advantage of detective fiction conventions to write something quite different from detective fiction', taking 'spare pieces' from the 'scrapyard' of exhausted, cliched literary techniques that defined the genre: 'the detective novel cliches are like the spare pieces of an old car the cannot run any more but, if sold as parts, can still be worth something'.[17] The classic tropes remained but were presented in a more abstract and less defined way, as the boundaries of the genre were challenged by writers such as Ann Petry. For example, the 'crime' in Petry's *The Street* is the myth of the American dream and not a literal, figurative crime such as a murder. In this dissertation, I will analyse the ways that the anti-detective tradition was employed by African American writers to raise questions among their readership about life as an African American. For example, *The Street* discusses issues such as housing inequality, sexual assault, and social mobility in Harlem and Himes' *If He Hollers Let Him Go* sheds light on the institutionalized racism within the justice system. Using novels as a way to discuss these real-world issues became a trope of the genre, and fiction proved to be a more impactful place to raise these issues than non-fiction newspapers and journals.

The use of setting is also used as a tool used throughout African American literature, to better illustrate points made by authors about African American life, and to firmly root their stories in reality. A classic example of a real-world setting used by writers such as Petry and Himes is

[17] Stefano Tani, *The Doomed Detective: The Contribution of the Detective Novel to Postmodern American & Italian Fiction* (Illinois : Southern Illinois University Press, 1984) p. 34

Harlem, America's 'largest and most iconic black community'.[18] Lutie Johnson, for example, lives on 116th street, a very real place that an American readership would recognize and be able to visualize. Similarly, stories about African Americans that have migrated from the American south to large cities such as Los Angeles reflect real migration patterns. *If He Hollers Let Him Go* and *Devil in a Blue Dress* both depict protagonists that have moved to Los Angeles in hopes of finding more progressive attitudes but find that this liberalism is largely performative. For example, Bob Jones, Himes' protagonist in *If He Hollers Let Him Go,* is given the title of 'leaderman' by his employer, seemingly a status symbol and sign of respect. Yet, this is snatched away at his first indiscretion and his employer does little to defend him when he is falsely accused of rape. Although Bob has escaped the oppressive Jim Crow laws of the south, he learns that racist attitudes have followed him to Los Angeles. In *Blanche on the Lam*, Blanche flees New York City for Farleigh, North Carolina and finds herself coming to a similar conclusion. Her employer, Grace, is largely pleasant and indifferent to Blanche throughout the novel but calls her 'nigger bitch' and 'black slut' when she is challenged.[19] Here, setting is used to create a commentary on the changing attitudes across America, and place seemingly fictional stories in a realistic context.

This thesis examines the role of the detective figure in 20th Century African American crime fiction and argue that African American writers subverted and adapted the tropes of this genre to find a space for social critique. Characters such as Easy Rawlins, Bigger Thomas and Lutie Johnson became mouthpieces for the African American community. From the subversive anti-

[18] Thulani Davis, 'African American Literary Movements' in *The Cambridge Companion to the Literature of New York*, ed. Cyrus Patell and Bryan Waterman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010) pp. 160-176, p. 160

[19] Neely, *Blanche on the Lam*, p. 124

detective novel tradition, to the discussion of W.E.B DuBois' theory of 'double consciousness', to utilizing elements of the popular pulp fiction trend, to choosing historically black settings such as Harlem as backdrops for their stories, a generation of writers found a channel of communication in the genre. This thesis ends with the assertion that the detective figure within African American crime fiction was assigned a new role as they became inspiring symbols for a frustrated community of people.

Ann Petry and The Anti-Detective

In her 1946 novel, *The Street,* Ann Petry casts Lutie Johnson in the role of protagonist - a young African American woman and mother attempting to build a life for herself and her son, Bub, in 1940's Harlem. *The Street* documents the short period of time that Lutie spent living on Harlem's 116th Street, during which the reader watches her become slowly awakened to the reality of the discrimination that she experiences as an African American woman, a 'feeling of one's twoness' that is named by W.E.B. DuBois as 'double consciousness'.[20] From extorsion, to violent assaults by her landlord, to Bub being taken to a Children's Shelter, Lutie is slowly broken down during her time on 116th Street and her naïve, blind faith in the American dream is shattered. Petry's protagonist eventually leaves Harlem after her growing frustrations result in a violent murder. Eventually, Lutie abandons Bub and flees to Chicago, an enlightened woman. In this chapter, I will discuss Lutie's role as the detective figure in *The Street,* and the methods that Petry uses to adapt the conventions of the crime genre to construct a narrative around African American life. In the introduction to the Virago Modern Classics edition of the novel, Tayari Jones begins by explaining how Lutie's role in this novel is notoriously difficult to classify. Jones illustrates how wide the spectrum of interpretations of *The Street* are as she recalls a visit to a bookshop and seeing the multitude of different covers of the same book on the shelf. One edition was 'all muted grayscale tones' and showed 'a child hugging his mother's legs'; another portrayed Lutie as 'a buxom bombshell corseted into a red dress'; another edition shows Lutie 'dressed in a 1980s skirt suit, as she rests her hands on the shoulders of her small son' and looks like 'a woman on her way to the office, pondering issues of work/life balance'.[21] These

[20] DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, p. 13
[21] Petry, foreword.

conflicting images are a useful representation of the wide range of interpretations of *The Street*, Petry's best-known novel and the focus of this chapter. Lutie adopts aspects of several character types – she is the detective figure as she learns about the 'crime' of discrimination against her community, the villain as she murders Boots and the victim of extorsion and sexual assault. A 2021 *New York Times* review of *The Street* describes the novel as 'a work of close documentation and intimate perception' and argues that Lutie is simply intended to serve as 'utterly believable United States citizen', a vehicle for Petry to write about politics. [22] It is true that this is certainly a novel about far more than a crime, Petry centres her story around the character of Lutie but the 'lens' of this story is designed to be 'more panoramic' than typical detective novel, as Petry uses Lutie to raise questions about African American issues.[23] Lutie is a character that is near impossible to place into any singular box and Petry offers up her protagonist to her readership, for them to define themselves.

Critics such as Ralph Willett, Keith Clark and Stefano Tani have used the term 'anti-detective' to describe Lutie Johnson. The anti-detective novel adheres to the rules of the crime fiction genre – a detective figure, a crime, a grand reveal – but in a more subversive and less formulaic way. Ann Petry was one of the first and most notable examples of writers using this style of writing, she was a writer known for using her stories about everyday life to discuss complex and multi-layered issues. When *The Street* was published in 1946, the genre was evolving and African American writers were beginning to play with the form to re-focus their stories on African American lives, rather than a crime, and became more subversive in their approach.[24] This is

[22] Alfred Butterfield, 'Review: The Street by Ann Petry', *The New York Times Sunday Book Review* (2021), p. 37
[23] Keith Clark, 'A Distaff Dream Deferred? Ann Petry and the Art of Subversion', *African American Review*, 26:3 (1992) 495-505 (p. 503)
[24] Tani, 36

echoed in other contemporary works of *The Street*, such as Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940). Much like Lutie Johnson the protagonist of *Native Son*, Bigger Thomas, is intended to represent a wider community of real-life people. Both novels hinge around explosive, impulsive murder scenes, driven by deep-seated resentment. Bigger, an African American man, murders a rich white woman named Mary Dalton in this novel by suffocating her to death. Parallels can be drawn here between Mary and Boots, both white characters that represent the corruption and falseness of the American dream in their respective novels; these murders paint powerful images for their readerships and are intentional narrative choices for Petry and Wright. Wright and Petry are among a generation of African American writers that subverted the crime genre, pushing the confines of the genre to form a social critique, paving the way for later African American 'genre' fiction.

Tani reminds us that the anti-detective novel was always intended to serve 'not as a continuation of the genre but as a transgression of it'.[25] In her novel, Petry *adapts* elements of crime fiction to form a social critique; *The Street* is primarily centered around a discussion of duality of consciousness, and tells a story of a frustrated, fractured and polarized African American community. In this chapter, I will consider the ways in which Lutie's time spent living on 116th Street can considered an investigation into double consciousness, with Lutie cast in the role of detective. Petry writes in a fluid and open-ended style and encourages multiple interpretations of the same story – she prompts us to ask ourselves questions about the subject matter that we are reading. Petry also drew upon aspects of the sensational and popular pulp fiction genre to market her story to the masses – a Harlem street, seedy characters, violent crimes and a gruesome

[25] Tani, p. 40

murder are all classic elements of the pulp novel. Petry's inclusion of these elements are intentional and designed to make her story more marketable and enticing for consumers. Petry aimed to create a narrative that would be 'like an explosion inside the head of the reader', using violent imagery to create an emotive and personal account of Harlem life.[26] From the inclusion of an anti-detective figure, to sensationalized elements of pulp fiction, to an ambiguous conclusion, Petry's *The Street* is a masterful example of the art of using the novel as social criticism. *The Street* is activism as it is a story about crime, and this chapter will analyse the techniques Petry uses to raise questions about African American life within her writing.

The Anti-Detective Novel

Following the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920's and 1930's, writers such as Ann Petry began to slowly expand the confines of the American crime fiction genre and the rigid, formulaic tropes that the genre was originally known for became more open to interpretation as stories became more focused on politics. Critics would later name this the 'anti-detective novel'. McCaffery and Gregory write: 'it used to be so simple: there was a crime; there were clues; there was a detective who, by logic and reason, successfully interpreted those clues; and there was the inevitable solution'.[27] This predictable pattern allowed readers of the genre to make assumptions about the stories that they read; the anti-detective novel is defined by its decision to subvert these expectations. Anti-detective writers 'reduce the text to its basic elements' – a crime, detective, clues and an inevitable solution – but interpret them in their own, abstract way in an attempt to

[26] Robert Levine, *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, 10th edn, (New York: W. W. Norton and Company Inc, 2022), p. 974
[27] Larry McCaffery and Sinda Gregory, 'Major's *Reflex and Bone Structure* and the Anti-Detective Tradition', *Black American Literature Forum*, 13:2 (1979), pp. 39-45 (p. 39)

make stories about politics more impactful and thought provoking. [28] For example, Lutie acts as our detective figure but does not work for a recognized police department or as a private investigator, nor does she identify herself as a detective. There is a 'crime' that is investigated throughout this novel, but this is left undefined and unpunished; this crime is the myth of the American dream and the false hope that it breeds among Americans. The 'criminal' of this story is similarly never named, as Petry blames a corrupt system as opposed to an individual. There is no sense of justice being achieved in *The Street*'s conclusion, nor is there an arrest made or punishment carried out, yet Petry still reaches a complete and sensical conclusion in her novel. The anti-detective novel became a popular medium for African American writers such as Petry to offer a first-hand account of the African American experience, and protagonists such as Lutie Johnson were employed by writers to illustrate their points. Robin W. Winks describes this 'outpouring of books' by African American writers as 'a handy mirror to the nation's paranoia, as well as another point of entry into the study of American aspirations and myth'.[29] *The Street* is a masterful example of this technique and was an inspiration to African American writers in the decades that followed, such as Chester Himes and Walter Mosley. *The Street* is a novel that fulfils the tropes of classical detective fiction in some ways, but the findings of Lutie Johnson's investigation are not clear cut – 'the solution, although still present, is ambiguous'.[30] Stefano Tani writes that the anti-detective novel took crime fiction from cheap, disposable products to respected literature, and characters such as Lutie were responsible for transcending expectations of the detective figure. These authors 'transformed a mass-media genre into a sophisticated expression of avant-garde sensibility' by 'decentering' the crime from their narratives.[31] Petry

[28] Soitos, *The Blues Dective: A Study of African American Detective Fiction*, p. 218
[29] Robin W. Winks, 'American Detective Fiction', *American Studies International*, 19:1 (1980), pp. 3-16, p. 3
[30] Tani, p. 24
[31] Tani, p. 40

was a pioneer of this approach, she moved towards a looser and less defined crime fiction novel, with a thinly veiled political commentary at its heart. In chapter four, I will discuss how Barbara Neely builds on this technique made popular by earlier writers such as Petry, in her detective figure Blanche White. Blanche, also a female African American detective figure, goes one step further than Lutie and is actively aware of her double consciousness, openly pointing out examples of discrimination that she experiences to her readership.

The most obvious example of Petry playing with the conventions of the detective novel is *The Street*'s ambiguous conclusion, and her choice to not name any one individual as her villain. As a reader may expect of a crime fiction novel, a villain is revealed in the final chapters, but there is no arrest made or dramatic scene in a drawing room. Instead, Lutie's equivalent of a 'Nancy Drew' moment comes in the form of a violent confrontation with Boots, after learning that Bub has been sent to a Children's Shelter, after being convinced to steal mail by Jones. The criminal in this story is not one person but a group of people, the corrupt American elite who enable and profit from the discrimination of African Americans such as Lutie Johnson and her neighbors on 116th Street. Petry reveals our criminal to be 'the creeping, silent thing that she had sensed in the theater, in the beauty parlor… a formless, shapeless, a fluid moving mass – something disembodied that she couldn't see, could only sense'.[32] 'Disembodied' is an important word choice because the villain of this novel is not a person, but rather an idea, that is represented by Boots.

[32] Petry p. 418

Although there is no individual criminal named, for the sake of a satisfying conclusion to Petry's narrative, Boots is used as a symbol of corrupt America in Lutie's eyes and serves as the villain figure within this story's conclusion. Here, the defining feature of a detective novel is upheld, but the twist on this tradition allows *The Street* to use the anti-detective tradition to subvert reader's expectations and grab their attention. In this scene, Boots is dehumanized, and Lutie admits 'his name might have been Brown or Smith or Wilson'.[33] Understanding that he is one of the only methods that Lutie can use to get the money needed to free Bub, Boots sees an opportunity to grope her and manipulate her into sex. Lutie pushes him away and as she stares at him it dawns on her: 'he represented everything she had hated, everything she had fought against, everything that had served to frustrate her'.[34] In this moment, Boots becomes a manifestation of the unfair treatment and discrimination that Lutie has experienced her entire life and as she stares at him 'she felt she was gazing straight at the street with its rows of old houses, its piles of garbage, its swarms of children'.[35] The narrator remarks that 'the anger surging through her wasn't directed solely at him' and when Lutie brutally murders Boots with a candlestick she sees herself as killing an 'anonymous figure'.[36] She kept striking him, 'not thinking about him, not even seeing him'.[37] This is an important distinction that Petry makes, Boots' death is a metaphor and offers a climax in order to uphold the detective novel structure. Petry is careful to make it clear to her readership here that they should not focus on the murder of Boots himself, but rather Lutie's frustration at all he represents. Just as the street that they live on could have been any street in the city, Boots could have been any privileged, exploitative man in America in Lutie's eyes. The narrator reminds us that Lutie 'was striking at the white world which thrust black people into a

[33] Clare Virginia Eby, 'Beyond Protest: *The Street* as Humanitarian Narrative', *MELUS*, (33:1), 2008, pp. 33-53 (p. 47)
[34] Petry, p. 429
[35] Petry. p. 426
[36] Petry, p. 429
[37] Petry, p. 422

walled enclosure from which there was no escape'.[38] This is an example of the subtle free indirect discourse that Petry uses within this novel, using a fictional plot to protest real issues and frustrations affecting the African American community. For example, Boots represents those in positions of power who extort, manipulate and objectify African American women.

Vernon Lattin describes Ann Petry as 'an author who can see through the illusions of the American way of life that distorts and destroys individuals… she has exposed the American Dream as a nightmare which forces Lutie Johnson to murder'.[39] This violent and tragic conclusion to Lutie's story is designed to shock and force the reader to ask themselves: is the villain of this story Boots the corrupt businessman, Lutie the murderer, or something invisible and wider that is unable to be pinned onto one individual? In this dissertation, I argue that the true villain of Petry's novel is the myth of the American dream, that instills false hope in African Americans such as Lutie Johnson and enables the corrupt behaviors of people such as Boots. Frank Kermode famously wrote that a detective novel needs only 'a sense of an ending' to fulfil its purpose, an idea that is certainly represented in Petry's novel.[40] Tropes of the crime fiction novel are presented here, but subverted also – Lutie leaves her reader with 'a sense of an ending' as the novel's 'criminal' is revealed to be the myth of the American dream, and Lutie's investigation seemingly comes to a close. Patricia Collins describes this as Lutie realising that she 'experiences a different reality' to her white peers, and her journey towards understanding of her second plane of consciousness is complete.[41]

[38] Petry, p. 430
[39] Vernon Lattin, 'Ann Petry and the American Dream', *Black American Literature Forum*, 12:2 (1978) 69-72, p. 72
[40] Elana Gomel, 'Mystery, Apocalypse and Utopia: The Case of the Ontological Detective Story', *Science Fiction Studies* 22:3 (1995), 343-356, p. 343
[41] Collins, p. 748

Petry's conclusion is also ambiguous in the way that it does not define the crime that has been committed. A contemporary readership would have grown to expect a literal, violent crime – 'usually a murder' – to form the plot of a crime novel, but the anti-detective denies its reader this fulfilling ending.[42] For example, these novels may only fulfil the sense of an ending partially, deny it totally or parody it'.[43] A turning point in the novel comes when Bub is taken away form Lutie - distraught, she shouts 'Damn it! Damn it!' as she beats the walls of her apartment with her fists.[44] She finally loses all composure and hope for her life on 116th Street in this moment, and the last remaining ember of her naïve optimism and faith in the American dream is stomped out. She realises that her goal of escaping the street is futile, because America was full of streets just like 116th Street: 'it wasn't just this city… it was any city where they set up a line and say black folks stay on this side and white folks on this side'.[45]

Later, a lawyer explains that he believes it would be relatively easy to convince a judge to release Bub, if only Lutie could produce the fee to pay him. The lawyer explains: 'he's only eight. Too young to have any moral sense. And then, of course, the street'.[46] When Lutie asks what he means by this he replies flatly as he 'waves his hand toward the window in an all-inclusive gesture': 'any street - any place where there's slums and dirt and poverty you find crime'.[47] In this scene, the crime that has been committed against Lutie is revealed – the American dream has failed her, and she has finally reached an understanding of her own double consciousness. Unlike a traditional detective novel, the reader is asked 'to put together clues' by themselves,

[42] Tani, p. 41
[43] Tani, p. 42
[44] Petry, p. 374
[45] Petry, p. 206
[46] Petry, p. 391
[47] Petry, p. 392

'not to reach a solution, but to understand the process of understanding'.[48] In this example the reader witnesses the 'process' of becoming doubly conscious. Bub himself notices the change in his mother that occurred during their time on 116th Street, imagining that the three dollars he earned from stealing mail would please Lutie: 'they would laugh and joke and have a good time together the way they used to before she changed so. He tried to think of a word that would describe the way she had been lately – mad, he guessed'.[49] 'Mad' is an simplified way of describing the change in Lutie, but 'madness' is a good description of the emotions Lutie displays once she discovers the 'crime' that has been committed against her. Lutie fills the role of both detective and victim here, another example of Petry twisting the tropes of the genre. Lutie leaves the lawyer's office defeated but with a new understanding of how 'the street' operates. She leaves with a piece of 'crisp, crackling white paper in her hand' which she recognises as 'a symbol of doom'.[50] Furthermore, she realises that she must beg Boots, a representation of corrupt white America, for money to pay a white lawyer to convince a white judge to free her wrongly imprisoned son. Echoing the motif of the wind within the novel, Petry summaries the completion of this journey: 'the street reached out and sucked them up'.[51] Petry's choice of crime is also a fulfilment of the anti-detective novel, there is no arrest or sense of justice but there is a crime committed against Petry's protagonist, nonetheless.

Lutie Johnson is a detective figure in *The Street*, but her investigation looks different than a reader may expect of a detective novel. Anti-detective heroes such as Lutie Johnson are designed to be 'real human people' and not 'dummies stuffed into the clothes of the parts they are

[48] Michael Holquist, 'Metaphysical Detective Stories in Postwar Fiction', in The Poetics of Murder: Detective Fiction and Literary Theory, ed. Glenn Most and William Stowe, (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), p. 149
[49] Petry, p. 429
[50] Petry, p. 147
[51] Petry, p. 147

supposed to act'.[52] Lutie Johnson is very much a representation of 'real human people' - she is not a police officer, private detective or a professional investigator in any capacity. Traditional detective figures, such as Chester Himes' Jones and Johnson, carry out an investigation professionally, with the goal of arresting a criminal for a crime. But, their commentary on life as African Americans living in Harlem is skewed because they work within the confines of a racist justice system. They live 'bouncing between two worlds… fully integrated into neither'.[53] These detective figures work 'paradoxically as servants of a hierarchical system' and 'their power is severely constrained'.[54] Lutie Johnson's investigation is different – her work is not carried out on behalf of a police department, and the crime that she investigates is a wider and more abstract one that cannot be tied to one individual, nor can it be neatly solved. In this sense, Lutie's story is designed to be more reflective of real life, because of course the issues depicted within this novel are far from fictional, and Lutie is a representative of tens of thousands of Harlemites.

Stefano Tani describes the anti-detective as 'metafictional', designed to illustrate something far beyond fiction and discuss real-world issues.[55] McCaffery and Gregory assert that 'fiction is not really the proper place to solve these kinds of mysteries at all', because in the real world 'there are no neat wrap-ups, no simplistic summaries'.[56] The black detective figure is a tool used to offer a more personal illustration of the issues affecting the African American community, and can make a social commentary on racial discrimination richer and emotive in a way that non-fiction work that attempts to do the same thing cannot. The inclusion of a black detective figure when discussing issues affecting the African American community is important and is a trope

[52] Sean McCann, *The Cambridge Companion to American Crime Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 43
[53] Ralph Willett, *Hard Boiled Detective Fiction*, (Keele: British Association for American Studies, 1992) p. 6
[54] Willett, *Hard Boiled Detective Fiction*, p. 35
[55] Tani, p. 113
[56] McCaffery and Gregory, p. 45

that came to define this sub-genre. Instead of being employed as a professional detective, Lutie is motivated to investigate crime by 'anger and aggression', and she works with a 'rage kept simmering in Harlem by squalor and oppression'.[57] Lutie is far from a classical detective figure – a family-oriented woman, who does not carry out her investigation consciously. Yet, Lutie fulfils the definition of a hardboiled detective, nonetheless.

African American writers have a long tradition of using literature as a space to discuss African American issues. In his 1937 essay *Blueprint for Negro Writing*, Richard Wright writes that he was living through a turning point in African American literature: 'negro writing in the past has been confined to humble novels, poems and plays, prim and decorous ambassadors who went a-begging to white America'.[58] W.E.B DuBois was a driving force in this movement toward 'depicting young black heroes enraged by racism'.[59] An early, and very popular, example of this movement is Richard Wright's 1940 novel *Native Son.* This urgent tone of this novel is introduced with its famous first line: 'Brrrrrriiiiiiing! An alarm clock clanged in the dark and silent room'.[60] In an introduction to the novel written by Arnold Rampersad of Princeton University, this is described as 'Wright's urgent call in 1940 to America to awaken from its self-induced slumber about the reality of race relations in the nation'.[61] Rampersad goes onto explain that 'Wright insisted the nation was facing a grave danger' and *Native Son* was intended to be 'America's guide in confronting this danger'.[62] *Native Son*, much like *The Street* is an excellent example of a fictional story that is written about real-life topics, designed to inform as much as

[57] Willett, *Hard Boiled Detective Fiction*, p. 35
[58] Richard Wright, 'Blueprint for Negro Writing', *Within the Circle: An Anthology of African American Literary Criticism from the Harlem Renaissance to the Present* (1994), pp. 97-108, p. 97
[59] Arnold Rampersad, *Native Son* (London: Vintage Classics, 2000), introduction
[60] Richard Wright, *Native Son* (London: Vintage Classics, 2000), p. 12
[61] Rampersad, *Native Son*, Introduction
[62] Rampersad, *Native Son*, Introduction

entertain. Rampersad writes that although 'American literature had witnessed cameo appearances by renegade blacks… no one quite like Bigger Thomas had ever been seen before the publication of *Native Son*'.[63] Wright's narration is intended to tell a story from Bigger's perspective and voice his political opinions in the process; Bigger's consciousness is 'at the centre of *Native Son*'.[64] A key aspect of this anti-detective novel is 'the ubiquitousness of Bigger'; it must be remembered that characters such as Lutie Johnson and Bigger Thomas are tools for social critique as much as fictional people.

The theme of death runs throughout both *The Street* and *Native Son* - Abdul R. Jan Mohamed describes death as having a 'psychopolitical function' in Wright's work.[65] Mohamed argues that Bigger's death sentence in the novels conclusion serves as a means of escape from 'social death', the 'death-in-life of the slave'.[66] Similarly, Lutie's murder and subsequent decision to flee Harlem can be interpreted as a 'death-in-life', a surrendering to the crushing weight of existing as an African American in an institutionally racist country. Richard Wright writes that 'Bigger is meant to terrify us, and he does, but Wright has the skill to show us that all too frequently… Bigger acts out of intense fear, a realistic terror of the world… he murders Mary because he is driven by hatred of all whites'.[67] John M. Reilly wrote that 'the description of Mary's murder makes clear that the white world is the cause of violent desires and reactions' that motivated Bigger Thomas to murder Mary Dalton. Similarly, Boots is written as a faceless representation of white America in the scene that Lutie murders him in.

[63] Rampersad, *Native Son*, Introduction
[64] Rampersad, *Native Son*, Introduction
[65] Abdul R. Jan Mohamed, *The Death-Bound Subject: Richard Wright's Archaeology of Death*, (New York: Duke University Press, 2005), p. 26
[66] Mohamed, p. 28
[67] Wright, 'Blueprint for Negro Writing', p. 87

Following the birth of the anti-detective novel, Ralph Willett offered a new, looser set of rules in 1996. He wrote that to qualify as a hardboiled detective figure, a character must only have 'physical courage affirmed as masculine potency, fortitude, moral strength, a fierce desire for justice, social marginality and a degree of anti-intellectualism' as well as being 'conspicuously bloody minded towards official institutions' and serving as 'a people's champion, answering the cries of voices heard in the darkness of night'.[68] John G Cawelti adds that this character must have a 'marginal social status' and act as 'a form of rebellion against society'.[69] Despite appearing very different to traditional hardboiled detectives, largely working class men solving violent crimes in big cities, Petry's Lutie Johnson certainly fits this criteria. A 'marginal status', 'fortitude' and 'desire for justice' are certainly critical elements of Lutie's character from the outset. It is important to note that nowhere in their definitions do Willett or Cawelti insist that this character carries out a formal investigation, for example into a murder, theft or other recognised crime, or carries out an investigation professionally, such as a police officer or private investigator. This is a detective that may uncover a crime within the novel, but there may not be an arrest or even an identified criminal. Petry achieves this in Lutie Johnson, and she leaves her role as a detective to be discovered by the reader, as they are taken along her investigation with her. Grella declared that the detective genre was dead – a genre lost to history as the American political climate shifted in the wake of World War II. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that the genre had changed beyond recognition, twisted into something unrecognisable by anti-detective writers. Grella's new criteria is valuable, because it expands the confines of the genre to include more experimental, modern and abstract interpretations of the tropes that defined it.

[68] Willet, *Hard Boiled Detective Fiction*, p. 6
[69] John Cawelti, *Adventure, Mystery and Romance: Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977) p. 57

Lutie's revelation is an understanding of her own double consciousness; she 'feels her twoness' as an African American woman in this moment.[70] and, although she never sets out on a formal investigation, she largely fulfills the role of detective regardless, her journey's completion symbolized by her snapping under the weight of her frustrations and murdering Boots, who had grown to represent the corruption of the American dream in Lutie's eyes. The crime within this novel is the unfair treatment of Lutie and the members of the African American community that she shares her street with, such as discrimination in housing, employment, education, and many other areas. Here, the tropes of the crime fiction genre are fulfilled, but Petry also writes using techniques and themes that pulp fiction writers used to create the most marketable and thrilling novel that they could.

The Influence of Pulp Fiction

The Street is a brilliant example of a crime fiction novel that draws upon thrilling, sensational elements of popular pulp fiction novels in order to make a serious story about double consciousness and discrimination more appealing and exciting for a market of post-war customers that craved violence. Sex, violence, urban backgrounds and fast-paced dialogue characterized these novels and *The Street* draws on these themes, designed to entertain and appeal to a mass audience, and transforms them into a rich, valuable and intentional piece of social commentary. Classic elements of the pulp fiction novel are certainly visible in *The Street*, with Lutie being relentlessly assaulted, sexualized and manipulated by the characters that she shares 116th Street with. Petry's novel features a gritty city setting, a fast pace and dramatic plot

[70] DuBois, *Souls of Black Folk*, p. 13

twists – but also largely follows the formula and patterns that her readership would expect of a detective novel. The choice of Harlem as a setting reminds the reader that this story is rooted in real life; Ralph Willett writes that Petry's 116th Street serves as an 'image of the city as a wasteland devastated by drugs, violence, pollution, garbage and a decaying physical infrastructure'.[71] Paul Gilroy's 1993 study of black Atlantic culture, *Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness,* analyses the effects of the Atlantic slave trade, and argues that double consciousness, and its reflection in African American literature, is a direct, lingering result of slavery in America. In a 2002 review of this study, Christine Chivallon writes that depictions of double consciousness such as *The Street* were crucial for the 'construction of African American intellectual history', intellectualizing pulp fiction novels as serious African American literature.[72]

Pulp fiction was born from a demand for cheap, disposable entertainment – quickly written, often as a direct reaction to sales trends among customers. The popular fiction market was largely a 'manipulation of the masses' and the subject matter of these novels was simply a reaction to what sold best.[73] Erin Smith reminds us that, as a result of this, 'writers, editors and publishers of pulp magazines can tell us a great deal about the audience' that they catered to because they had 'to appeal to deeply felt needs and desires in order to manipulate their audience'.[74] Exhausted working class Americans turned to pulp fiction as a form of easy escapism and distraction from the issues of their everyday lives; easily available and easily interpreted, these novels were

[71] Willett, *Hard Boiled Detective Fiction*, p. 5
[72] Christine Chivallon, 'Beyond Gilroy's Black Atlantic: The Experience of the African Diaspora', Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies, 11:3 (2002) pp. 359-382, p. 359

[73] Erin Smith, *Hard-Boiled: Working Class Readers and Pulp Magazines* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000), p. 6
[74] Smith, p. 9

products designed to be sold. However, Petry utilises this sales tactic within her writing, to push her political commentary. After all, Petry's decision to mimic pulp fiction novels was certainly a profitable one - this was the first novel written by an African American woman to sell over a million copies, far outselling Petry's earlier non-fiction works. Petry's political opinions became more marketable to the masses when presented in a pulp fiction style, novels such as *The Street* sold far better than social realist and protest fiction that attempted to do the same thing. Petry began her career as a pharmacist before becoming a journalist whilst living in Harlem, writing for *The Amsterdam News* and *The People's Voice*. In *Notes of a Native Son,* James Baldwin describes the black press as being 'gleefully devoted to murders, rapes, raids on love-nests, interracial wars', and Petry's understanding of this defined her writing style, because she saw that sensational writing is what interested readers and sold newspapers.[75] *The People's Voice* in particular was deeply political – 'hopelessly militant, full of warnings, appeals and open letters to the government'.[76] It is perhaps unsurprising that her early social realist writing would be echoed in her later works of fiction, 'playing with the rules and the techniques of detective fiction… to obtain something else'.[77] Particularly, reading these works of fiction in hindsight can give us an invaluable insight into the grievances of the African American community at the time of writing. A demand for stories that centred around African American protagonists – that discussed race, crime, discrimination, and double consciousness – is very telling, and novels such as Petry's *The Street*, Rudolph Fisher's *The Conjure Man Dies*, and John Edward Bruce's *The Black Sleuth* can be held as valuable historical artefacts.

[75] James Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 2012) p. 62
[76] Baldwin, p. 63
[77] Tani, p. 24

In his study *Black Pulp: Genre Fiction in the Shadow of Jim Crow,* Brooks Hefner investigates the history of African American pulp fiction, an 'underexamined literary archive'.[79] Hefner sheds light on writers such as Petry, who wrote with the goal of 'disassembling generic formulas saturated with racism', and instead subverting the original tropes of the crime genre 'in the service of racial justice'.[80] Hefner describes this niche subgenre as 'pleasure-as-politics' fiction, a fictional story with a very real meaning behind it, with the aim of 'radical social and political change'.[81] In a review of this text, Kirin Wachter-Grene reminds us that pulp fiction such as *The Street* was an important tool for collective 'racial consciousness', and acted as a form of social activism.[82]

For Ann Petry, themes of violence, discrimination and invisibility are far more than pulp fiction tropes – she writes from her own personal experience living on a Harlem street that is reflected in her novel, and the journalistic element of her writing cannot be denied. The popularity of *The Street* speaks volumes about the scale of people who shared her frustrations, and is a testament to the power of these feelings within her community. Lutie's Harlem is a very real place, and a popular choice of setting for African American writers such as Petry because of its large black population. Harlem 'stood for a century as this country's largest and most iconic black community' and when used as a setting for a story, can allow writers to offer a glimpse into the duality of being both African and American.[83] This technique is repeated in Petry's later novel,

[79] Kirin Wachter Grene, 'Review', *ALH Online Review,* 36 (2023), pp. 1020-1023, p. 1021

[80] Hefner, p. 7

[81] Hefner, p. 2
[82] Grene, p. 1022
[83] Thulani Davis, 'African American Literary Movements' in *The Cambridge Companion to the Literature of New York,* ed. Cyrus Patell and Bryan Waterman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010) pp. 160-176, p. 160

The Narrrows (1953), which is set in the fictional town of Monmouth, Connecticut. This is a town also characterized by its African American population, created to be a setting for a story about racial discrimination; 'The Narrows' are nicknamed 'Little Harlem, Dark Town, Niggertown'.[84] Petry's narration is vivid and valuable because she has experience of the world that she describes, and also a strong journalistic background as a writer. A tale drenched in violence, sex, and fear, set in a gritty, Harlem street is typical of a pulp fiction novel, and these themes were used to market Petry's earlier political commentaries in a more sensational way. Petry was a writer who wrote to provoke thought and discussion amongst her readership; her writing is political to its core but *The Street* is, arguably, her best execution of this writing technique.

The Narrows repeats *The Street*'s frustrated, resentful feeling that the African American community felt towards the American dream. This novel is much more narratively complex than *The Street*, written in the third person at some points and in the first person in others. This novel is also split between present day and flashbacks to decades earlier. Critic Hilary Holladay wrote that '*The Narrows* represents the full flowering of Petry's preoccupation with human relationships'.[85] This novel follows Link Williams, an African American man that majors in history at Dartmouth but finds himself working in a bar in The Narrows following his graduation, aptly named The Last Chance. His adoptive mother, Abbie is less than supportive and asks 'whoever heard of a colored historian?'.[86] Link secretly studies the history of slavery in the United States whist bartending, a reminder of his wasted potential as he, like Lutie Johnson,

[84] Ann Petry, The Narrows (Boston: The Riverside Press, 1953), p. 5
[85] Hilary Holladay, *Ann Petry* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1996), p. 1

[86] Ann Petry, *The Narrows*, (New York: Harper Collins, 2023), p. 413

finds himself frustrated at the false promise of the American Dream as he enters adulthood. Link is an example of a character that has achieved a university degree, a significant symbol of success for African Americans in 1953 but is still disappointed by his career prospects after graduation. In the novel's conclusion, Link is brutally murdered as a consequence of his affair with a white woman, Camilla. This sensational, racially motivated murder follows the pattern set by novels such as *The Street* and *Native Son*.

Maureen Reddy explains that novels such as Petry's *The Street* and *The Narrows* are 'an exaggerated version – but only a very slightly exaggerated version – of mainstream American ideology, particularly as that ideology was propounded in the years between the world wars'.[87] It should be remembered that *The Street* was published in 1946, directly after the Second World War and post-war audiences 'were eager for fiction that acknowledged the realities of the industrial metropolis'.[88] A new breed of detective story was born – one that placed an emphasis on the corruption and violence that seemed to characterize the rapidly growing major American cities.[89] 116th Street is designed to be a representation of this lawless 'industrial metropolis', and as Lutie learns about the corruption and violence that breed here. Petry's readership is taken on this journey also and Petry leaves her readers with a call to action. The reclamation of the genre by African American writers was a significant change in direction for American crime fiction: 'the pulp fiction genre, and its evolution into the African American hardboiled crime fiction genre that followed it, was an innovation that made room for new voices and previously unwritten experiences in crime fiction'.[90] The evolution from pulp fiction, which was largely not

[87] Maureen Reddy, *Traces, Codes and Clues: Reading Race in Crime Fiction* (New York: Rutgers University Press, 2003) p. 9
[88] McCann, p. 42
[89] McCann, p. 43
[90] Reddy, p. 15

taken as serious literature by critics, to the respected hardboiled genre is a significant shift throughout the 20th century. Hardboiled fiction is usually seen by critics and by readers as 'transgressive in its insistence on an outsider's perspective' and an aim of African American crime fiction was 'rewriting the hard-boiled to include those conventionally silenced by it'.[91] *The Street* is an example of Petry's use of a triple-layered approach: Petry uses tropes of the pulp fiction genre to make her story more marketable, whilst still adhering to tropes and patterns of a novel within the crime fiction genre and all the while using the story to directly tackle and discuss issues that were affecting the African American community. Ralph Willett writes that 'the blurring of the distinction between popular and high art enables hard-boiled fiction to be regarded as a new hybrid and self-conscious intertextual form'.[93] 'Self-conscious' is certainly an apt description of Petry's writing style – she wrote with a definite purpose and used her characters as blank canvases on which to paint her discussions of important political issues. The flatness of Lutie's characterization is key to Petry's narration here, the novel's conclusion re-iterates her point; she boards the train to Chicago and feels 'swallowed up' by the masses as 'people flowed and spilled through the gates like water running over a dam'. [94] Petry purposefully leaves her readership with this image of Lutie disappearing among the masses, among a country of people that feel the same way as her.

The most notable element of the pulp fiction genre that Petry draws upon is violence. Violence defines Lutie's time on 116th Street, and this theme is introduced within the first scene of the novel. Petry describes the sensory overwhelm that Lutie experiences, and a feeling of dread and

[91] Reddy, p. 15
[93] Willett, *Hard Boiled Detective Fiction*, p. 5
[94] Petry, p. 434

foreboding defines her narration. The novel opens with: 'there was a cold November wind blowing through 116th Street. It rattled the tops of garbage cans, sucked window shades out through the top of opened windows and set them flapping back against the windows'.[95] Petry's opening lines here set out the purpose of her novel within the first words – before even our protagonist is introduced, the Street itself is introduced as an important character within this novel. Language such as 'rattled' and 'flapping' evoke an image of violent chaos. The 'wind' is a symbol of the unseen but all-consuming force that attacks Lutie and her neighbours throughout her journey. Of course, we later learn that this force represents the discrimination and unfair treatment that she experiences as an African American.

Petry describes the strength of wind down 116th Street as a 'violent assault'.[96] The wind 'did everything it could to discourage the people walking along the street' and the 'dirt and grime' surround Lutie: 'dirt got into their noses, making it difficult to breathe; the dust got into their eyes and blinded them… grit stung their skins'.[97] This sensory imagery is designed to place the reader in Lutie's shoes, introducing the setting of Petry's story as dangerous and violent, and sensationalising her narration. Word choices such as 'violent assault', 'blinded' and 'grit stung their skins' echo the characteristic violence, drama and sensationalism of the pulp fiction genre. The motif of the wind attacking and hindering the lives of African Americans that live on 116th Street is seen in the way that it physically stops them from walking: 'it wrapped newspaper around their feet entangling them… the wind grabbed their hats, pried their scarves from around their necks, stuck its fingers inside their coat collars, blew their coats away from their bodies'.[98]

[95] Petry, p. 1
[96] Petry, p. 1
[97] Petry, p. 2
[98] Petry, p. 3

The wind is a relentless, unseen and all-powerful force at play here, and this motif continues throughout Lutie's story.

It is noteworthy that the wind eventually stops during the climax of the novel's violence, when Boots is murdered by Lutie. When he dies, 'a stillness' falls over the street for the first time, a symbol of Lutie's journey towards understanding reaching completion.[99] The cyclical nature of this motif mirrors the cycle of Lutie fleeing one street for another. 'Each time she thought she had the sign in focus, the wind pushed it away from her' introduces the wind as personified, cheekily finding its way into the space that Lutie naively believes is safe.[100] Petry writes that Lutie 'shivered as the cold fingers of the wind touched the back of her neck, explored the sides of her head'.[101] 'Explored the sides of her head' is especially noteworthy, because it subtly introduces the idea that Lutie is blissfully unaware of danger that she is in, but the 'wind' of change has begun to enter her mind from even her first few steps along the street. Similarly, the wind 'pried at the red skullcap on her head' and became 'angered because it couldn't tear it loose from its firm anchorage of bobby pins'.[102] This is a symbol of Lutie's stubbornness and her will to not be swept away by the 'winds' that try to knock her down on 116th street.

This theme of resistance is a key feature of the character of Lutie; she is a victim of a string of sexual assaults throughout her time on 116th Street. She is attacked by Jones, Junto and Boots, and in each of these violent altercations Lutie fights back, shocked at the mistreatment that she receives because she is still naïve to the realities of living as an African American woman. In the

[99] Petry, p. 411
[100] Petry, p. 4
[101] Petry, p. 3
[102] Petry, p. 1

novel's conclusion, Lutie finds that 'shouting wasn't enough' and is compelled by her anger to murder Boots.[103] With each example of mistreatment, a rage builds throughout the novel and Lutie eventually erupts, describing a 'deepening stream of rage that had fed on the hate, the frustration, the resentment she had toward the pattern her life had followed'.[104] Interestingly, after Lutie views the apartment and agrees to take it, she leaves the building with a sense of acceptance; she 'flung herself into the wind, welcoming its attack'.[105] This scene teaches the reader two important things about Lutie Johnson: there are unseen forces working against her, and she will stubbornly resist them. From the outset, Lutie has been objectified and wronged by the violent men in her life; her husband and father of her son cheated on her, and abandoned her, leaving her unable to get a divorce. Then Jones, a maintenance worker in her building, becomes obsessed with her, manipulating her young son and attacking her. In the climax of the novel, she is violently and sexually assaulted by Boots, who she kills with a candlestick in a fit of rage: 'this impulse to violence had been in her for a long time, growing, feeding, until finally she had blown up in a thousand pieces'[106].

An 'impulse to violence' is an important aspect of Petry's narration, the possibility of a violent attack lingers from the introduction until the final pages. This is a technique purposely used by pulp fiction writers to maintain the attention of their readers, and in this instance Petry aims to dramatize a story with a deeper, political meaning. This technique is repeated in countless examples of hardboiled fiction – an excellent example is Chester Himes' *If He Hollers Let Him Go,* where the protagonist carries a gun throughout the novel, fantasising about murder. This

[103] Petry, p. 428
[104] Petry, p. 428
[105] Petry, p. 53
[106] Petry, p. 425

hidden gun, only known about by the reader, represents the protagonist being constantly on the cusp of exploding in a fit of rage. Similarly, Petry's protagonist explodes in the novel's conclusion and, through her use of free indirect discourse, Petry expresses her frustration at the stereotyping of African Americans as 'naturally criminal' or 'a threat'.[107] This link between African American protagonists and violence is an excellent example of Petry drawing on sensational elements of the pulp fiction genre, tropes of the detective novel formula, and the social realist fiction that she began her career writing, to create a compelling and personal social commentary. Petry uses her novel to comment on real-world issues, such as sexual assault, housing inequality, residential segregation and lack of social mobility within the African American community.

Another element of pulp fiction that Petry explores through her protagonist of Lutie Johnson is the sexualisation of women. Just as African American detectives were used to discuss African American issues, female detectives were used to discuss women's issues. Lutie is purposely built differently to the traditional, male hardboiled detective because she serves a different purpose. Petry is successful in creating a meaningful commentary on African American women's issues, because she does not model Lutie 'directly on male models' in the genre; in Lutie, Petry creates a tailor-made canvas to paint onto.[109] For example, Petry's protagonist is unmarried, nor does she fall in love and get married within *The Street*. This, Soitos suggests, is Petry's attempt to 'subvert the genre and critique the dominant male viewpoint'.[110] Amatueur female detectives such as Lutie Johnson, or Barbara Neely's Blanche White, are important additions to the crime genre

[107] Petry, p. 199
[109] Soitos, *The Blues Detective: A Study of African American Detective Fiction*, p. 227
[110] Soitos, *The Blues Detective: A Study of African American Detective Fiction*, p. 227

because they 'consciously and carefully tell women's stories through feminocentric plots and structures which challenge the generic restrictions'.[111] From her first encounter with Jones, Lutie expresses a feeling of fear and discomfort as she senses 'his eyes traveling over her – estimating her, summing her up, wondering about her'.[112]

A fear of men and their potential to assault her haunts Lutie throughout the novel, and acts as a continual reminder that she is unsafe on the street. Jones expresses his 'love and desire for Lutie' as he 'dwelt on her figure, etching it again and again in the darkness', meanwhile Lutie 'dreamed about him and woke up terrified, not certain that it was a dream and heard the wind sighing in the airshaft'.[113] This quote is symbolic when it is remembered that the 'wind' represents the dangers that surround Lutie and creep into her street, her apartment, and her mind when she is unaware, much like Jones. On one occasion, she finds herself in a room alone with Jones and her imagination paints an eerily foreboding picture: 'suppose he'd started walking toward me, nearer and nearer in the dark. And I could only hear his footsteps, couldn't see him, but could hear him coming closer until I started reaching out in the dark trying to keep him away from me, trying to keep him from touching me'.[114] Of course, Lutie's fears are shown to be justified later in the novel as Jones violently assaults her and attempts to drag her into the cellar, before being stopped and chastised by Mrs Hedges. Lutie 'writhed and twisted in his arms, bracing her feet, clawing at his face with her nails and Jones 'ignored her frantic effort'.[115] As Mrs Hedges intervenes, the contrast between her and Lutie is noteworthy. Mrs Hedges wears a 'big white

[111] Kathleen Gregory Klein, *The Woman Detective: Gender and Genre* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), p. 229
[112] Petry, p. 13
[113] Petry, p. 191
[114] Petry, p. 88
[115] Petry, p. 235

nightgown' with 'a balloon-like quality', which contrasts Lutie's short 'evening skirt'.[116] Mrs Hedges' skin was 'a mass of scars – terrible scars' and had eyes 'like stones that had been polished… with no emotion, no feeling in them', a physical illustration of the emotional effects of a life spent on 116th Street.[117] The 'huge and unattractive' Mrs Hedges offers a contrast to Lutie's youth, naivety and sexualisation; she is a character that is fully aware of her double consciousness and is hardened to the reality of life on the street.[118] The depiction of women in this scene is fascinating, and Petry illustrates how men place value on women based on their appearance – Jones' attraction to Lutie puts her in danger and removes the respect from their relationship that is present between him and Mrs Hedges. It is also noteworthy that Mrs Hedges actually defends Jones to Lutie afterwards, dismissing him as 'cellar crazy'.[119] Lutie appears shocked at how indifferent Mrs Hedges is to her attack, she snaps back: 'other people have lived in cellars and it didn't set them crazy'.[120] The contrast here is subtle yet important, Mrs Hedges is accustomed to the violence on 116th Street and the indignation that Lutie exhibits has melted away over her time spent living there.

This sexual undertone to Petry's narration is echoed throughout every corner of this story. Junto's bar is introduced as a space designed for men that were 'interested' in women, and for women to entice these men: 'those who were interested in women could get an accurate evaluation of the girls who switched past in short tight skirts'.[121] Petry explains that Lutie first visits Junto's 'so that she could for a moment capture the illusion of having some of the things

[116] Petry, p. 279
[117] Petry, p. 237
[118] Petry, p. 242
[119] Petry, p. 354
[120] Petry, p. 86
[121] Petry, p. 143

that she lacked', such as a feeling that she is powerful.[122] In Junto's, roles are reversed as women such as Lutie have a sense of power over the men and use the promise of sex to control them. Junto's represents a place of freedom for Lutie, and many of the other African Americans that attend the bar throughout Petry's novel, a place where the promise of the American dream feels alive. Lutie goes for 'the sound of laughter, the hum of talk, the sight of people and brilliant lights, the sparkle of the big mirror, the rhythmic music from the juke-box'.[123] This is another example of Lutie's naivety, because of course she is sexualised from the moment she sets foot in the door. In Lutie's first interaction with Boots, he pays for her drinks without asking, and the first thing he says to her is 'do you sing for a living'.[124] This is significant, because from the outset Lutie's relationship with Boots is transactional, centred around money and sex. Also, this feeling of control is false, because it is understood that the men that hold the power in Junto's, and they can choose which women are allowed to access this. Lutie's naivety and misplaced faith in the people around her is proven when she tells herself that 'tomorrow night she was going to find out from Boots what her salary would be and then she would move out of this house'.[125] But, of course, this money never comes and her trouble with Jones is only just beginning. Interestingly, sexual power does not extend to all women in this story – 'old' women 'seemed to tremble with rage at the sight of the Junto's doors' and the men standing on the sidewalk 'moved closer to each other, forming a protective island with their shoulders… so as to shut out the sound and the sight of the old women'.[126] Yet 'young' women, such as Lutie Johnson, are welcomed by the men in Junto's bar and actively seek their attention, in the knowledge that a

[122] Petry, p. 144
[123] Petry, p. 145
[124] Petry, p. 149
[125] Petry, p. 226
[126] Petry, p. 143

relationship with these men could benefit them. Of course, Lutie Johnson does not understand this until it is far too late.

A Journey Towards Double Consciousness

The Street's Lutie Johnson embarks on a journey towards understanding her second plane of consciousness as an African American, and she ultimately flees 116th Street, defeated but awake. Feelings of double-consciousness and invisibility define Lutie, a character designed to symbolise the feelings of frustration and resentment within the African American community. Even the choice of name for this novel, *The Street*, introduces us to this overarching theme before even reading the first page - Petry reminds us that although this novel is centred around one individual, she lives on a street of people just like her, with similar stories of their own. She laments that she would experience comparable treatment on any street 'where the black folks were crammed on top of each other – jammed and packed and forced into the smallest possible space until they were completely cut off from light and air'.[127] And of course, streets like 116th Street exist across every town in America – with 'dust and grime on the sidewalk' and apartments 'not fit for pigs to live in, let alone people'.[131] The conclusion of Petry's anti-detective novel differs from a classical hardboiled ending, where a fictional crime is solved and a criminal is identified, because the crime committed against Lutie Johnson is not fictional and far from being solved. The issues affecting Lutie and her neighbours are real, and the duality of *The Street* is clear in Petry's conclusion: this novel is both entertainment and a form of social protest. In the final pages of the novel, Lutie reflects that she and Bub 'didn't have the ghost of a chance

[127] Petry, p. 206
[131] Petry, p. 386

on that street', leaving the reader with a sense that an enlightening shift has occurred as Lutie's worldview becomes more rooted in reality.[132] It is noteworthy that Lutie moves from Harlem to Chicago, from one large American city to another. This theme of migration to 'cacophonous big cities of the North' is also a major trope of the American crime fiction genre, and a direct reflection of the real life 'Great Migration'.[133] Almost 6 million African Americans uprooted themselves in an attempt to escape the 'brutally repressive regime of the Jim Crow south' that served to 'dehumanise and disenfranchise blacks'.[134] The character of Lutie Johnson is among these people, moving to Harlem's 116th Street with blind optimism. As she begins her new life on 116th Street she acknowledges that streets like 116th Street 'had turned Pop into a sly old man who drank too much' and 'had killed Mom off when she was in her prime' but Lutie somehow believes she will not suffer the same fate.[135] Petry introduces naivety as a tragic character flaw of Lutie Johnson's and Petry chooses to end her story on a bittersweet note – she is no longer victim to the trappings of the American dream but in her enlightened state she has become painfully aware of her double-consciousness. The reader never learns if Lutie finds a better life in Chicago, or if she finds herself living on a street identical to the one she escaped. This slow breaking down of her faith in her country and the privileged elite that run it is a powerful choice made by Petry and makes her exploration of the damaging effects of systematic discrimination on the African American community all the more striking, leaving us with questions of our own about the issues affecting African Americans.

[132] Petry, p. 435
[133] Isabel Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns : The Epic Story of America's Great Migration* (Random House, 2016), p. 250
[134] Joe Varghese Yeldho, 'Sounding Harlem: Ann Petry's the Street and the Experience of "Dwelling"', *American, British and Canadian Studies*, 34:1 (2020), 69–83, p. 70
[135] Petry, p. 56

The choice of a literal street as a backdrop for this story is a symbol within itself, both a place and a state of mind. A street in Harlem paints an image of people transiting between Harlem, 'the capital of black America' and Manhattan, a symbol of the promise of the elusive American Dream.[136] In many ways, the street is depicted throughout the novel as a sort of psychological prison; Lutie is seemingly free to leave at any given point, and she eventually does, but there is an implication that she will end up where she began in time. She describes feeling 'neatly caged' by both the place she lives and the lack of opportunities that it can provide for her.[137] She even goes on to imagine 'eager white hands' snatching these opportunities away from her 'to keep Negroes in their place'.[138] When this is remembered, her choice to flee to Chicago is all the more bitter since the reader can foresee that she may well suffer the same fate in her new street in Chicago. T*he Street* is a direct product of Petry's own time spent as a journalist and resident of Harlem. Flatness is key to Petry's presentation of Lutie, she is intended to represent an entire community of African Americans that were awakened to their own double consciousness through the events of the 20th century. *The Street* documents Lutie's arrival at this conclusion and poses several open-ended questions to the readership about the importance and value of African Americans becoming 'awakened'.

Throughout her narration, Petry includes flashbacks to Lutie's time spent working for the Chandler family. These memories serve as a juxtaposition to life on 116th Street, and illustrate where Lutie's unrealistic expectations of the American dream may have stemmed from. In one scene, she sees an advertisement on the subway which prompts a memory of the Chandler family

[136] Cheryl Wall, *The Harlem Renaissance: A Very Short Introduction* (New York City, Oxford University Press USA, 2016), p. 44
[137] Petry, p. 324
[138] Petry, p. 323

home. The advertisement displays 'a girl with incredible blond hair' and 'a dark-haired, smiling man in a navy uniform', an image of the wealth and success that she craves.[140] The 'crisp black-and-white pattern' of the floor sparks a recollection of her time with the white, rich and delusional Chandler family in Connecticut, where she 'scrubbed and waxed' an identical kitchen floor.[141] There is a stark contrast between 116th Street and the street that the Chandlers lived on, lined with elm trees that 'made a pattern like the lace on expensive nightgowns' on the pavement in the sunlight and without 'another coloured person in sight'.[142] Lutie decides that, ironically, 'that kitchen sink in the advertisement or one just like it was what had wrecked her and Jim' because the job required her to leave him.[143] It seems that whatever street in America Lutie lives on, she is at a disadvantage. The house itself 'was like something in the movies' to Lutie; Mrs Chandler's bedroom 'ran across one whole end of the house so that windows looked out on the river, out on the gardens in front, out on the woods at the side', whereas Lutie has an air vent instead of a window.[144] Furthermore, it surprised Lutie that this house didn't seem to impress the Chandlers very much, even learning that Mrs Chandler's parents called it 'the children's house', implying that this was intended to be a smaller house to raise children in: 'they thought this doll-house affair cute and just right for children for a few years'.[145] Lutie is inspired by people like Mr Chandler and Benjamin Franklin, convinced that she too is entitled to success if she works hard. She forgets that Mr Chandler inherited his paper napkin business from his father and he and his friends had gone to top American universities such as Yale, Harvard and Princeton 'casually, matter-of-factly, and because they had to'. Lutie's naivety is fuelled further as she

[140] Petry, p. 28
[141] Petry, p. 28
[142] Petry, p. 29
[143] Petry, p. 30
[144] Petry, p. 38
[145] Petry, p. 37

overhears their conversations: ‘make it while you’re young… anyone can do it… richest damn country in the world’.[146]

Vernon Lattin describes Lutie as a flat character, as ‘black, female and poor’ and argues that she is designed by Petry to represent a group of people rather than an individual.[147] This is one of the many dualities of Petry’s protagonists – Lutie can be taken as both a flat and a rounded character depending on the reading of the novel; she ‘swallows the fantasy of the American Dream before realising it does not apply to her’.[148] This is juxtaposed by Jim’s inability to get a job, although he hunted for one ‘desperately, eagerly, anxiously’ and he quipped: ‘God damn white people anyway….all I want is a job… don’t they know if I knew how I’d change the color of my skin?’.[149] This belief of Lutie’s is dangerous, and the pressure to ‘make it while you’re young’ haunts her until she ultimately realises that she does not have the advantages that the Chandlers have and is rudely awakened to her own double consciousness. Despite the niceties shared between her and Mrs Chandler, Lutie was never treated as an equal and always held at an arm’s length. She felt as though she ‘was looking through a hole in a wall at some enchanted garden’ and ‘could see, she could hear, she spoke the language of the people in the garden, but she couldn’t get past the wall’.[150] This image is an apt summary of Petry’s warning, she warns us that access to the ‘enchanted garden’ of success in America is reserved for an elite, privileged minority.

[146] Petry, p. 43
[147] Lattin, p. 70
[148] Lattin, p. 70
[149] Petry, p. 30
[150] Petry, p. 41

The plot of *The Street* is centred around the awakening to a duality of consciousness, with the aim of both entertaining her readership with a fictional story and educating them about the 'fractured worldview' that Soitos describes in *The Blues Detective*.[151] Petry encourages her readership to ask themselves questions about their own consciousness and to arrive at the same lightbulb moment that Lutie did on the train to Chicago. The street in Harlem is the crime scene, a graveyard of broken dreams, filled with the ghosts of African Americans that once believed in the American dream. As Lutie's hope dies, she finally joins these ghosts and she is freed from her faith in her country, and flees 116th Street for Chicago, now a murderer on the run. She buys a one-way ticket, and thinks to herself 'I've had one since the day I was born'.[152] Similarly, Petry speaks to her readership as she describes Lutie sitting on the train to Chicago, and leaves her reader with an important reminder: in the same way that 116th Street could have been 'any street' in America, Lutie represents any African American. Building on Du Bois' writing on double-consciousness, Harold Cruse published *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* in 1967 and coined another phase: 'community consciousness'.[154] He defines community consciousness as the collective awakening within the African American community to their own double consciousness; this awakening was 'undeniable and instrumental in activating the slow march to the Civil Rights Movement'[155]. Farah Griffin writes that post-World War Two New York became a place that 'gave vision and voice' to the African American community's feelings of 'fear and longing, trepidation and possibility' and so acts as a fitting backdrop to these real

[151] Soitos, *The Blues Dective: A Study of African American Detective Fiction*, p. 34
[152] Petry, p. 434
[154] Harold Cruse, *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual : A Historical Analysis of the Failure of Black Leadership* (New York: Morrow, 1967), p. 159
[155] Yeldho, p. 73

stories of a real population of African Americans that suffered from a fractured consciousnesses.[156]

Petry was a writer defined by the complexity and depth of her work, her literary choices often serving dual meanings. From the subtlety of her exploration of double consciousness, to the straddling between both the pulp fiction genre and the crime fiction genre, Ann Petry purposely leaves her novel open to interpretation. Petry was a political writer at heart, and her time spent living in Harlem, training as a journalist, and career in social realist literature all prepared her for her success as a fiction writer. This is a story about fictional characters, but it is also an extension of Petry's earlier non-fiction work about her experiences as an African American woman, specifically living in Harlem. Petry also plays with tropes of the genre, including a detective figure, crime that is investigated and dramatic revelation at the novel's conclusion, but she subverts the formulaic approach that is expected of the genre. Petry uses aspects of the pulp fiction genre that swept the nation to entice her readership, disguising her political commentary within a seemingly disconnected story. In conclusion, Petry is one of the most notable examples of a group of writers that subverted their readership's expectations of the crime fiction genre to push an ulterior motive. Petry became known for the duality of her novels and using them to pose questions to her reader.

[156] Farah Griffin, *Harlem Nocturne: Women Artists & Progressive Politics during World War II* (New York: Basic Civitas, 2013), p. 1

Chester Himes and the Hardboiled Detective

Chester Himes is a name that is synonymous with the crime fiction genre. His hardboiled, yet complex and thought-provoking novels changed what defined a novel as crime fiction. Himes' writing was political to its core, and he used his novels to create rich, insightful social commentaries, best known for their violent, charismatic, and pensive protagonists. Yet beneath these characters, Himes told secondary stories about life as an African American man in a post-World War Two America. In this chapter I will focus on three of his novels in particular: *Cotton Comes to Harlem* (1965) and *A Rage in Harlem* (1957), taken from Himes' *Harlem Cycle* series, and an earlier novel titled *If He Hollers Let Him Go* (1945). Himes' stories were about so much more than just crime - the *Harlem Cycle* series especially uses its detectives, Jones and Johnson, to create 'a social critique that unequivocally demonstrates the effects of racism and poverty in Harlem'.[157] These novels are as much social commentaries as they are stories about crime. Known for reference to violence, sexual mistreatment, racism within the American justice system and feelings of invisibility, Himes' writing is defined by one overarching theme: the imbalance of power. Du Bois writes that it is not 'possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American without being cursed' by the seemingly immovable power structure that exists within American culture.[158] DuBois' principle of double consciousness is the foundation that Himes builds his characters upon, and his detective figures were largely used as vessels to discuss power imbalances within the novel. Himes' writing tackles this both directly and indirectly – by choosing to centre his novels around the lives of fictional African Americans, and also have them discuss real-world issues such as the anger and disappointment felt by African American World

[157] Soitos, *The Blues Detective: A Study of African American Detective Fiction*, p. 125
[158] DuBois, p. 9

War II veterans upon returning home to find little had been done to tackle the discrimination that they experienced in a country that they fought for. The idea of double consciousness is important because it illuminates the experiences of black people living in post-slavery America, and because it sets a framework for understanding the position of oppressed people in an oppressive world.

DuBois' theory of double consciousness was crucial to the politicisation of the genre, and also 'helped to create the intellectual argument for the black freedom struggle in the twentieth century'.[159] In *Living Black History*, DuBois's biographer Manning Marable describes this essay as a 'foundational text for the movements and struggles of an entire people' and 'a stunning critique of how race is lived through normal aspects of daily life'.[160] Characters such as Chester Himes' Bob Jones, Walter Mosley's Easy Rawlins and Barbara Neely's Blanche White are all designed to offer insight into 'normal aspects of daily life' for African Americans, turning stories about seemingly fictional characters into protest novels. DuBois writes *Souls of Black Folk* in 1903, at the turn of the 20th century, reflecting on the transitional period that the African American community was going through, and how this is visible in the African American art produced at this time: 'the nation has not yet found peace from its sins… the freedman has not yet found freedom in his promised land'.[161] Protagonists such as Bob Jones are symbols of this feeling, fleeing the south for Los Angeles, but finding that racist attitudes are still alive in large cities, but are just more covert. DuBois describes the African American community in his essay

[159] Manning Marable, *Living Black History: How Reimagining the African-American Past Can Remake America's Racial Future* (London: Civitas Books, 2011), p. 96
[160] Marable, *Living Black History: How Reimagining the African-American Past Can Remake America's Racial Future*, p. 96
[161] DuBois, *Souls of Black Folk*, p. 197

as ‘living haunted by the ghost of an untrue dream’, promised freedom in the American Dream, but systematically disappointed as the duality of their consciousness comes to light.[162]

This theory was discussed, criticized and built upon in the decades that followed; a notable contribution to this discussion is philosopher-psychiatrist Frantz Fanon’s 1952 novel *Black Skin, White Masks*. In this novel, Fanon describes the ways that American politics is structured to keep African Americans in an ‘inferior status within a colonial order’.[163] Examples given include lack of access to higher education, residential segregation, and racist stereotypes attached to the African American vernacular. Fanon writes that African Americans must wear ‘white masks’ if they are to succeed in achieving the American dream. The sixth chapter of this novel, ‘The Negro and Psychopathology’, argues that there is an association between ‘blackness’ and ‘wrongness’ and a duality of consciousness is triggered as African Americans feel that they must reject their blackness to achieve success.[164]

There has been much scholarship written around Himes, and his contributions to the hardboiled crime genre as a whole. In this chapter, I will draw upon Gilbert Muller’s *Chester Himes* (1989), Ralph Willett’s *The Naked City: Urban Crime Fiction in the USA* (1992) to define the black harboiled detective figure as a ‘representative black man’.[165] Maureen Reddy’s chapter ‘Race and American Crime Fiction’, in *The Cambridge Companion to American Crime Fiction* (2010) and Stephen Soitos’ *The Blues Detective: A Study in African American Detective Fiction* (1996) offer clear definitions of the tropes of the hardboiled genre, and how they serve to sensationalise

[162] DuBois, *Souls of Black Folk*, p. 197
[163] Frantz Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks, (London: Penguin Modern Classics, 2021), p. 17
[164] Fanton, p. 156
[165] Muller, p. 23

political messages. Finally, 'Chester Himes: The Audacity of Blackness in Himes and His Harlem Detectives' (2010) offers a history of Himes' personal life, and an argument for the autobiographical nature of his work. I have chosen these texts, as they offer a range of opinions and insight into the work of Chester Himes, and each look at his work from a different angle.

The Threat of Violence

Violence has always been a defining trope of the American crime fiction genre and as this demand for violence in fiction grew, a new wave of hardboiled crime fiction was born. Writers such as Himes, Ross MacDonald and Robert Beck rejected the largely apolitical murder-mystery crime genre, and forged the new, grittier hardboiled subgenre that aimed to not only talk about crime, but the causes of the social problems that prompted these criminals to commit their crimes. The hardboiled genre has a long and complicated history in America and is deeply rooted in the history of protest novels written by the African American community. Himes uses violence to pose questions to his readership about racial tensions in America and argues that the violence that defined this era was a result of African Americans fearing for their safety. Often, beneath the lingering threat of violence, feelings of powerlessness and a desire to defend oneself can be found. Yet, Willett reminds us that 'it is not violence alone that identifies these texts as part of the hard-boiled tradition', and violent imagery was one of many stylistic devices used by hardboiled writers.[166] The hardboiled genre was born in the 1920's and flourished during the interwar period; the genre evolved from stories about gangsters, designed to entertain, to a space for African American writers to tell stories about their own lives and create complex social

[166] Willett, *The Naked City: Urban Crime Fiction in the USA*, p. 62

commentaries under the guise of stories about detectives and criminals. As the purpose of the crime novel changed, so did the role of the detective figure; as we reflect on the Civil Rights Movement, and the events that led up to it, these characters are invaluable resources for gaining insight into the frustrations of the African American community, who felt ignored by a government that claimed to support them.

Violence itself is central to Himes' work, with every novel of his including references to violent crime, but the underlying threat of violence is also an important feature of Himes' writing style. *If He Hollers Let Him Go* is an excellent example of this technique. In this novel, the threat of violence lingers over the protagonist, Robert "Bob" Jones, an African American shipyard worker. The first-person narration is designed to allow the reader insight into Bob's violent fantasies, including murdering Johnny and raping Madge, his white co-workers. The constant threat of violence creates tension within Bob's narration as he expresses genuinely fearing for his safety as an African American man - his preoccupation with violence is revealed to be born from a place of paranoia. This is symbolised by Bob's decision to carry a loaded '.45-calibre short-barrelled revolver'.[167] This is a constant, literal reminder that violence is in the back of his mind, Bob is always prepared to defend himself against the 'white threat' that haunts Los Angeles.[168] The gun is routinely referenced throughout the novel as Bob moves it in and out of his glove compartment, reminding the reader that our narrator is armed and always moments away from a violent outburst.

[167] Chester B. Himes, *If He Hollers Let Him Go,* (London: Serpent's Tail, 2016), p. 123
[168] Reddy, p. 39

The gun is a powerful, underlying symbol – Bob has the means to murder at any given point and expresses feeling empowered by this. Yet, it is important to note that despite fantasising about murder and rape, Bob never actually harms anybody in this novel and the gun simply serves as a comfort to him. He explains this to his girlfriend, Alice: 'I don't like to be pushed around all the time…a guy wants to feel he can control at least some of his life'.[169] He attributes his desire for 'control' to the way that he is treated by his white coworkers, who resent him because he is the only black leaderman on the shipyard, a title that is cruelly snatched away at his first indiscretion. This novel is set over only four days, designed to offer a small glimpse into Bob's life and the discrimination that he experiences. Gilbert H. Muller reminds us that Bob is a 'representative black man' and this novel documents his failed attempt to 'to escape the degradation and oppression that seems culturally predestined for him'.[170] Bob dreams of 'escaping' the reality that he lives in through violence, he imagines killing and raping his white peers, inspired by his desperate desire to feel power over them. Muller notes that this is repeated throughout Himes' writing and cites 'outrage' as the leading cause of violent crimes 'against dominant white authority figures'.[171] Among these 'dominant white authority figures' within Himes' novel is Johnny, a white co-worker of Bob's who assaults him within the opening chapters. A white bystander sees this and, 'shaking his head', refuses to help; he remarks: 'there these niggers is fighting already…whenever niggers gets together that's the first thing they gonna do'.[172]

[169] Himes, *If He Hollers Let Him Go*, p. 207
[170] Gilbert H. Muller, *Chester Himes*, (Boston: Twayne, 1989), p. 23
[171] Muller, p. 33
[172] Himes, *If He Hollers Let Him Go*, p. 13

Bob expresses a resentment towards the white people that he works with and entertains a fantasy of murdering Johnny, an image that is repeated whenever Bob becomes upset: 'I wanted to kill the son of a bitch and keep on living myself… I wanted him to feel as scared and powerless and unprotected as I felt'.[173] 'Scared and powerless and unprotected' is an especially powerful choice of words – Himes reminds his readers that this fantasy of violence is born from Bob's belief that he is under attack as an African American. Often these violent tendencies are born from a place of fear and a desire to protect oneself as a member of a marginalised group. Bob describes 'living every day scared, walled in, locked up'.[174] The image of imprisonment presented by 'locked up' is noteworthy here, and suggests that the narrator feels a fear of imprisonment as an African American and powerless against the unfair and overtly racist legal system. 'Walled in' also suggests that it is unclear who exactly is responsible for Bob's imprisonment, and that the discrimination he experiences is so wide and systematic it is impossible to pin the blame on any single person. This is a fantasy that is about more than just murder, Bob sees this as a symbolic opportunity to 'get even' with white America and reclaim power.[175]

The inciting incident of *If He Hollers Let Him Go* is an altercation between Bob and Madge. Bob's title as 'leaderman' in the shipyard is perilous because of his race and he is unfairly scrutinised from the outset. He describes how any loss of temper could lead to him being demoted, an issue that his white coworkers do not share: 'but one of the first things people in authority gotta learn is they can't lose their temper'.[176] When he finally snaps after Madge calls him a 'nigger' he is demoted, and a downward spiral of frustration and resentment begins. The

[173] Himes, *If He Hollers Let Him Go,* p. 43
[174] Himes, *If He Hollers Let Him Go,* p. 5
[175] Himes, *If He Hollers Let Him Go,* p. 62
[176] Himes, *If He Hollers Let Him Go,* p. 35

plot reaches a climax when Bob almost kills Johnny and Bob finally, momentarily, achieves the feeling of power that he has been craving. He stands, 'looking down at him and knew he was dead and [feeling] a crazy exultation, as if I had conquered the world'.[177] In each of his novels, Himes has a symbol for white America, and in *If He Hollers Let Him Go* it is undeniably Johnny. Bob imagines that his murder would symbolize some kind of personal triumph over the mistreatment that he has endured. However, his plan is foiled when a white woman sees him with a gun and he is arrested on suspicion of rape. Ultimately, Bob is sent into a paranoid breakdown and loses his job, his girlfriend, and his freedom as he is arrested and eventually forced to re-enlist in the army.

Of all of Himes' writing, *If He Hollers Let Him Go* is perhaps his novel that is most overtly centred around the relationship between power and race – in Himes' introduction to the New American Library edition of the novel, he assigns Bob a job within the novel: to 'inform the world about the black American's subconscious'.[178] Himes claimed to have begun to write a story about a mystery, but decided instead to shift away from the crime whilst writing. In an interview with Marcel Duhamel, Himes said 'I had started out to write a detective story when I wrote that novel, but I couldn't name the white man who was guilty because all white men are guilty'.[179] Himes opens his story with the protagonist dreaming of feeling 'small and humiliated and desperate, looking at the two big white men laughing at me' and his resentment towards white people is introduced as a theme of the novel from the beginning.[180] After all, not only is this is a novel about life as an African American man, and is narrated by an African American

[177] Himes, *If He Hollers Let Him Go*, p. 244
[178] Chester Himes, *If He Hollers Let Him Go*, (New York: New American Library, 1971) p. 8
[179] Himes, *My Life of Absurdity: The Autobiography of Chester Himes*, p. 102
[180] Himes, *If He Hollers Let Him Go*, p. 2

man, but it is also written by an African American man. Himes speaks directly to his readership through the character of Bob, who can be considered an abstract representation of Himes himself. Raymond Malewitz notes that characters such as Bob 'can also show us the limitations in our own worldview, which may differ in substantial ways from our world as it really is… stories offer us the opportunity to not only travel to different worlds and different time periods but also to inhabit different worldviews'.[181] Themes of degradation and oppression are key elements of Bob's narration and are also tropes of the wider hardboiled crime fiction genre. Himes uses a first-person narration to give his readership a vantage point to look at this story from, encouraging them to sympathise with Bob and understand why he might do the things that he does later in the novel, in his search for a feeling of power. Bob is told: 'you know as well as I do that part of your job was to help me keep down trouble between the white and coloured workers'.[182] His position as leaderman was withheld from him by his white peers and only finally given to him when they had something to gain from it. Mr Kelly, his superior, described Bob as having 'a chip on your shoulder like most coloured boys' and this raises an interesting question about the causation of these 'chips'. It is ironic that Mr Kelly in this instance does not stop to consider that his treatment of his African American employees is what has caused their feelings of resentment and frustration.

[181] Raymond Malewitz, 'What Is Free Indirect Discourse? Oregon State Guide to Literary Terms' (2020) https://liberalarts.oregonstate.edu/wlf/what-free-indirect-discourse [Accessed 5 November 2023]
[182] Himes, *If He Hollers Let Him Go*, p. 35

Institutional Racism Within the American Justice System

Himes uses his fictional characters to discuss real-life issues affecting African Americans throughout his work, particularly directly criticising the racist American justice system. The corruption and racism within the justice system is a crucial trope of both Himes' writing and the hardboiled genre, another notable example of this is Walter Mosley's Easy Rawlins character, who will be discussed in chapter three. Soitos reminds us that Himes 'followed the detective novel format to criticize racist practices as well as examine class issues and violence in Harlem'.[183] The conclusion of *If He Hollers Let Him Go* shows Bob being falsely accused of rape and being arrested. Despite being innocent, he is reluctantly forced to accept a plea deal and rejoining the army that he fought so hard to leave. The cyclical nature of this ending, with the innocent Bob being sent back to his army role that traumatized him, is the ultimate ironic reminder of who truly holds power in America. One of the most poignant moments in the novel is when the corporation president, Mr Houghton, says: 'I genuinely regret that circumstances permit you to escape punishment… you had no motive, not even an understandable excuse'.[184] Bob is accused of 'a crime of uncontrolled lust – the act of an animal' and is humiliated.[185] Mr Houghton patronises him further when he says 'you were given every opportunity to advance. You were the first Negro to be employed in a position of responsibility by our corporation and you were in a position to represent your race, to win for them advantages heretofore denied. You were selected because you were considered the highest type of Negro'.[186] 'Selected' is a final reminder that it was white people that acted as gatekeepers and granted Bob his illusion of power

[183] Soitos, 'African-American Detective Fiction: Surveying the Genre', p. 15
[184] Himes, *If He Hollers Let Him Go,* p. 250
[185] Himes, *If He Hollers Let Him Go,* p. 250
[186] Himes, *If He Hollers Let Him Go,* p. 250

in the first instance. Himes leaves his reader with the impression that a full rotation of a dangerous cycle has been completed here, as Bob goes from feeling powerless to seeking power through violence, and back again. 'Highest type of Negro' is especially cutting, as it dispels any illusion that Bob was ever welcomed by his white coworkers and was always viewed as separate from them. Bob's motivation to commit these crimes can largely be traced back to the feelings of powerlessness that come with the discrimination he experiences. The corruption and institutionalized racism within the justice system is no secret, and it is perhaps natural that a novel about the investigation of the criminal underworld in Los Angeles should include accounts of racial discrimination such as this.

Chester Himes also uses African American detective figures to illustrate the racism *within* the American justice system. *A Rage in Harlem* uses detectives Jones and Johnson to criticize racist practices within the New York Police Department. From the outset, race is an integral element of these characters, who show disproportionate sympathy for members of their African American community, particularly those who are victims of police brutality by white police officers. Jones and Johnson are under constant pressure to prove themselves, earn the respect of their openly racist co-workers and produce results for their white bosses. Himes routinely reminds the reader of the separation between Jones and Johnson and their white counterparts, and the mistrust that is born from this separation. Himes explains that 'it was the code of Harlem for one brother to help another lie to white cops'.[187] This conflict between working for the NYPD, within which racist attitudes run rampant, and being a black detective is an issue that bothers Jones and Johnson.

[187] Chester Himes, *A Rage in Harlem*, (London: Allison & Busby, 1985), p. 82

It must be remembered that the era of Jim Crow laws only ended in 1965, only eight years after Himes published *A Rage in Harlem* in 1957. Sean McCann writes that Himes' goal in creating these characters was to 'adapt the conventions of the genre to craft an account of the segregated life of Harlem', and show that their 'efforts to impose order and achieve justice' are futile because they are ultimately at the mercy of the white legal system that they work within.[188] Soitos describes them as 'double-conscious detectives', who 'bridge the white and black worlds, using both to their advantage'.[189] 'Blackness' is 'an integral ingredient' for the success of the investigation of Himes' detective figures - they simply have access to spaces where white police officers do not.[190] Just as Bob, the protagonist of *If He Hollers Let Him Go*, is only granted access to his promotion to leaderman because it benefited his white superiors, Jones and Johnson are only permitted to work legitimately as part of the NYPD since they have an investigative advantage when investigating in Harlem. Jones and Johnson understand that their position of authority has been granted to them by their white superiors and can equally be snatched away at any moment. Thus, the sense of power that they are experience as professional detectives is false, and performative.

Another method that Himes' detectives seek power within his novels is the use of force that is used to carry out investigations. Scenes of violent assault, psychological torture, extortion, and intimidation tactics are commonplace in Himes' work, and are used as investigative techniques by Jones and Johnson. They are criticized by their white superiors about their 'excessive use of force', but it is implied that these violent tactics are necessary if justice is to be achieved. This

[188] McCann, p. 55
[189] Stephen F. Soitos, *The Blues Detective: A Study in African American Detective Fiction*, (Amherst: U of Massachusetts Press, 1996), p. 126
[190] Reddy, p. 40

unique, and illegal, approach to enforcing the law is what makes Jones and Johnson different from other detective figures; Himes' detectives are known for justifying this violence as a means to an end.

Harlem is intentionally used as a backdrop for this novel, as it is 'a city within a city, with its own African American value systems and culture'.[191] It is a 'self-contained society' and its 'imprisoned' residents are left alone by their government to 'prey on each other'.[192] In *Cotton Comes to Harlem*, another novel written about the lives of Jones and Johnson, Himes goes as far as to describe them as 'extralegal', meaning that they are so powerful in Harlem that they are separate from the law, and work without fear of arrest.[193] 'Extralegal' tells the reader that Jones and Johnson are untouched by the constraints of the law like other detectives and are free to carry out their investigations as they please. Not only do Himes' detectives work outside of the law, but they also often work alone. Reddy argues that this is a direct role reversal of early hardboiled writers, who had their detectives 'be the sole white men tough enough to confront the lawlessness of mobs and racial others'.[194] In Himes' writing, it is the African American detective that delivers order and justice to his community.

It is also important to consider that Himes wrote with the intention of making race a key element of the identities of Jones and Johnson. Jones and Johnson's brutality is often shown as a reaction to deceit and exploitation, and their own personal methods of punishment are a way of exerting power over people that deem to be deserving of punishment. Himes poses an interesting question

[191] Soitos, *The Blues Detective : A Study of African American Detective Fiction*, p. 94
[192] Willett, *The Naked City: Urban Crime Fiction in the USA*, p. 65
[193] Norlisha Crawford, 'Good, Bad and Beautiful: Chester Himes's Femmes in Harlem', *NWSA Journal*, 18:2 (2006), pp. 194 – 216, p. 200
[194] Maureen Reddy, 'Race and American Crime Fiction', in *The Cambridge Companion to American Crime Fiction*, ed Catherine Ross Nickerson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 135-147, p. 137

here when we consider the bias of his narration – the reader naturally empathises with the detectives but we are left to decide for ourselves if the punishment administered is earned. The violent investigative methods of Jones and Johnson are, however, largely excused because they allow them to solve high-profile cases; there is little sympathy shown for these characters that they assault by the narrator because they are often implicated in serious crimes also. Peter Messent argues that violence is largely presented as 'a means of survival' for hardboiled protagonists, and 'one of the few avenues of possible material advancement in a brutish and Darwinian world'. [195]

Willett writes that these 'self-righteous judgements' elevate the status of these detectives and give them an unspoken power over their peers – they separate the Harlem population into 'good and evil, innocent and criminal'; Himes' hardboiled detectives 'save their wrath for those who prey on the community'. [196] For example, in *The Real Cool Killers*, Jones identifies the criminal at the end of the novel but decides not to surrender her to the law since the victim was 'known to abuse young black girls'.[197] The American justice system fails to provide justice to these characters, and so they are left to create justice for themselves and define 'justice' on their own terms. Unlike detectives such as Barbara Neely's Blanche White, Himes does not present his protagonists as tricksters that bend the law, but rather as heroes and survivors, undermining the justice system through their investigations in the knowledge that this system does not protect them. Racial solidarity forms a large part of the 'justice' served within Himes' writing – Himes has his protagonists 'dispense justice on behalf of a poverty stricken community threatened by

[195] Peter Messent. *The Crime Fiction Handbook* (London: John Wiley & Sons, 2012), p. 169
[196] Willett, *The Naked City: Urban Crime Fiction in the USA*, p. 62
[197] Willett, *The Naked City: Urban Crime Fiction in the USA*, p. 63

violent criminal activities'.[198] Himes himself summarises it best: 'it seemed so illogical to punish some poor criminal for doing something that civilization taught him how to do so he could have something that civilization taught him how to want. It seemed to him as wrong as if they had hung the gun that shot the man'.[199] Detective figures such as Jones and Johnson are portrayed by Himes as issuing a sense of order in a 'messy and turbulent atmosphere'.[200] Despite holding the legitimacy that comes with working for a formally recognised police department such as the New York Police Department, Johnson and Jones are treated differently than their white co-workers and superiors. It could be argued that they reclaim their blackness, with the knowledge that their violence will be overlooked by the NYPD due to their race. There is a long relationship between Harlem and the hardboiled crime fiction genre, and Himes is one of many writers that has chosen Harlem as a backdrop for stories about poverty, discrimination and power imbalances.

The Effect of the Second World War on the African American Community

In *If He Hollers Let Him Go*, Himes makes his intention to criticize the government's handling of the war clear from the outset, when he creates a narrator that has recently left the army. It must also be remembered that Himes wrote in the aftermath of the Second World War, and it is only natural that literature written in this era would be defined by the trauma of the event. By the end of the war, more than 695,000 African Americans were serving in the U.S. military, and Bob represents the hundreds of thousands of African American citizens that were discharged from the army, released into a country that still largely refused to work to change the internalized racism

[198] Willett, *The Naked City: Urban Crime Fiction in the USA*, p. 63
[199] Chester Himes, *Yesterday Will Make You Cry* (New York: Norton, 1998), p. 27
[200] Willett, *The Naked City: Urban Crime Fiction in the USA*, p. 64

that affected their everyday lives. This makes Himes' decision to send Bob back into the army all the more heartbreaking, since it was understood by his readership that the army meant he was entering a space of heightened racist attitudes and he had no option to fight this enlisting.

Racism is portrayed as a kind of silent warfare in this novel, and Bob sees himself as a soldier; Bob is never quite able to escape the fighting whether he is enrolled in the army or not. He finally is freed from his duties fighting for his country in the Second World War and returns to find another war on his doorstep. The novel opens with one of his many strange dreams about his experience in the war. In the dream, a white lieutenant is testing 'coloured fellows', by making them run up a flight of stairs and look a dead man in the face.[201] The narrator quickly realises that the act of looking at the corpse is irrelevant and the lieutenent 'keeps 'em running upstairs until you find out what one's crippled'.[202] This introduces the theme of resentment for his government from the outset; like many African Americans that served in the war, there was a growing sense of frustration when they returned to find that their politicians were doing little to tackle racial discrimination.

Bob expresses resentment for fighting for freedoms during the war that he did not seem to benefit from later. There are two wars referenced in this novel – the second world war and the war on racism in America. This novel was published in 1945, the same year that the Second World War had ended and tensions in America were steadily growing. Bob is traumatised by both wars at once and has been left with a deep resentment of white people. The novel is also cyclical in nature, since it concludes with Bob reluctantly being drafted into the army once again.

[201] Himes, *If He Hollers Let Him Go*, p. 2
[202] Himes, *If He Hollers Let Him Go*, p. 2

This choice of ending is significant because it leaves the narrator where he began – the opening of the book features Bob having a nightmare about his time in the army. He says 'I felt torn all loose inside, shrivelled, paralysed… every day now I'd been waking up that way, ever since the war began'.[203] This echoes the 'Double V Campaign' that was running at the time of writing, campaigning for victory both at home and abroad. Bob is a soldier long after he escapes the army and suffers as a result of both wars.

Sexual Violence

There is an undeniable sexual element to the violence within Himes' writing, and the women in his stories largely serve to evoke emotional responses from the reader either as sexualised love interests or victims of violent crimes. In either scenario, these characters illustrate the power of their male counterparts. Crawford argues that 'the black female characters Himes created in his Harlem are a force to be reckoned with each time the reader encounters them… they revel in the sexuality suggested by the tight-fitting clothes they wear over their ample bodies'.[204] She goes on to sum these female characters up as either 'comical, vulgar, or, at the least, excessive'.[205] In *If He Hollers Let Him Go* Bob has a complicated relationship with his white, racist boss in the shipyard, Madge; In their first interaction, she refuses 'to work with no nigger' and Bob calls her a 'cracker bitch', and thus the conflict between the pair begins.[206] Bob's immediate reaction is an urge to rape her, imagining a 'sexual thrill' and this fantasy becomes a motif throughout the novel.[207] Michael Jeffries describes *If He Hollers Let Him Go* as a 'sexually charged novel' and

[203] Himes, *If He Hollers Let Him Go*, p. 3
[204] Norlisha Crawford, 'Good, Bad and Beautiful: Chester Himes's Femmes in Harlem', *NWSA Journal*, (18:2), 2006, 193-217 (p. 193)
[205] Crawford, p. 193
[206] Himes, *If He Hollers Let Him Go*, p. 33
[207] Himes, *If He Hollers Let Him Go*, p. 33

argues that Bob's desire to rape Madge is a metaphor for his desire to seek revenge on white America.[208] He imagines her 'backing away from [Bob] as if she was scared stiff, as if she was a naked virgin and I was King Kong'.[209] This image of the rape of a white 'virgin' woman, and specifically the reference to *King Kong*, a film that depicts a giant ape destroying New York City, is a useful reminder that this is a novel about white power in America. Bob sees an opportunity to feel a sense of power over his white peers through violence - like the gun, a fantasy of rape is another motif that serves to remind the reader of Bob's craving for power. This urge to rape and kill is repeated throughout the novel, especially during moments where his frustration with his white superiors is heightened – for example, when he is violently assaulted by his white co-workers. It must be remembered that, for all of his violent fantasies, Bob neither rapes Madge nor kills Johnny. Jeffries also defines this novel as a 'protest novel' and Madge serves a double purpose – both as an example of a white character and a sex object within Bob's narration.[210].

Yet, Madge ultimately is revealed to have the upper hand in this relationship in the novel's conclusion, and the illusion of power that Bob's rape fantasy provides him with is shown to be false. Bob's frustrations reach a boiling point and he finally snaps after he loses his beloved position as leaderman within the company. He drives to Madge's house, to take some of the 'stinking prejudice out of her', after an electrician at the shipyard gives her address to Bob.[211] A violent altercation follows, and Bob leaves in a state of shock as he realizes that Madge holds power over him both as a woman and as a white American. In this moment, Bob's

[208] Michael P. Jeffries, 'How Chester B. Himes Became the Rage in Harlem, and Beyond', *The New York Times Sunday Book Review* (2017), p.18
[209] Himes, *If He Hollers Let Him Go*, p. 23
[210] Jeffries, 'How Chester B. Himes Became the Rage in Harlem, and Beyond', p. 18
[211] Himes, *If He Hollers Let Him Go*, p. 146

naivety is revealed, and it is made clear that violence cannot give him the true power that he craves. Madge promises to have him 'lynched right here in California', accuses him of rape, and a group of his co-workers beat him to a pulp.[212] Bob foresees his arrest in this moment, and any power that he felt disintegrates: 'I saw it coming big as a house but there wasn't anything I could do but wait for it'.[213] Madge weaponizes her sexuality: 'she wore a maddening teasing smile and her eyes were laughing at me…fluttering her mascaraed lashes…she killed me with her smile'.[214]

Bob is truly, deathly afraid of Madge and her power: 'I began to tremble… just scared to think about her, about living in the same world with her… like thinking about the electric chair'.[215] Yet, this power is conditional and melts away when Bob sees her without makeup for the first time; she 'looked like hell', her eyes used to be 'wide, blue, staring, almost popping, but now there was a muddy look to them', and 'her mouth as big, hard, brutal, with lips almost colourless'.[216] Interestingly, once Bob leaves her apartment after their violent altercation, she runs downstairs to his car to meet him 'fluttering' her 'mascaraed lashes'; she applies makeup before confronting him because she understands that her sexuality is where her power lies as a woman.[217] There is 'an intentionality to what Madge is doing' here and both her and Bob see that she is able to harness her power as a white woman whenever needed.[218]

[212] Himes, *If He Hollers Let Him Go*, p. 180
[213] Himes, *If He Hollers Let Him Go*, p. 247
[214] Himes, *If He Hollers Let Him Go*, p. 161
[215] Himes, *If He Hollers Let Him Go*, p. 86
[216] Himes, *If He Hollers Let Him Go*, p. 179
[217] Himes, *If He Hollers Let Him Go*, p. 183
[218] Adam Walz, 'Autonomy and Control in Chester Himes' If He Hollers Let Him Go', *IU South Bend Undergraduate Research Journal*, 18 (2018) pp. 109-118, p. 113

In the climax of this novel, Madge plays her final and most powerful card as she yells 'some white man, help me! I'm being raped" and "Nigger, don't. Oh, please don't kill me, nigger', and Bob's fate is sealed in this accusation.[219] Adam Walz describes this scene as a 'metaphorical lynching', and the second that Madge accuses Bob of raping her and a group of 'white knights' descend upon him.[220] Walz writes that Bob's role in this novel is to 'show us how dangerous the world is to navigate for an African American male and how easy it can be to lose control over your own autonomy'.[221] In the pursuit of whiteness Bob ultimately loses both his identity and his autonomy.

Bob also has a complicated relationship with black women in this novel. Alice, Bobs 'high-class, affluent, 'think-she's-white' girlfriend' is a black woman from a wealthy family, and she passes for white.[222] Bob is attracted to this whiteness and talks about his relationship with her as a method of gaining status in their small town. Alice's mother is critical of Bob's attitudes towards white America: 'you'll never make a success with that attitude… you mustn't think in terms of trying to get even with them, you must accept whatever they do for you and try to prove yourself worthy to be entrusted with more'. [223] This conversation is a significant moment in Bob's relationship with Alice, as he reflects on the difficulties of being in a relationship with a black woman who is passing for white. She goes on to explain 'you know how Southern people talk, how they feel about working with you coloured boys. They have to get used to it, you gotta give them time'.[224] Himes choosing a character that is passing for white is no coincidence, and

[219] Himes, *If He Hollers Let Him Go*, p. 222
[220] Walz, p. 116
[221] Walz, p. 117
[222] Walz, p. 111
[223] Himes, *If He Hollers Let Him Go*, p. 62
[224] Himes, *If He Hollers Let Him Go*, p. 35

Alice's character is used by Himes to pose several questions about power throughout the novel. Furthermore, Alice's characterisation serves to remind the reader of the narrator's craving for power; Bob sees his relationship with Alice as a way to advance in society. Ella Mae, a black woman whom he is having an affair with, warns Bob 'you're going to mess up yet… Alice don't know you like I do'.[225] 'Mess up' implies that the way that Bob is behaving around Alice is inauthentic, and it is ironic that his reply to this should be: 'I'm tryna turn white'.[226] The theme of passing is a trope of African American literature, and in this instance is used as a gateway into a narrator discussing passing as white as a means to access power in America.

It must be remembered that Himes himself, like Bob Jones migrated to Los Angeles from the south, hoping 'hoping to benefit from relaxed racial restrictions on hiring due to the massive labor shortage in the defense plants'.[227] In his 1971 autobiography, Himes describes the false belief that Los Angeles would be more progressive than the south:

> 'Los Angeles hurt me racially as much as any city I have ever known- much more than any city I remember from the South….black people were treated much the same as they were in an industrial city of the South. They were Jim-Crowed in housing, in employment, in public accommodations, such as hotels and restaurants'[228]

This is a story that reflects a very real community of people, and it is no coincidence that Himes chose to set this story in post-war Los Angeles. Himes was one of more than 70,000 African

[225] Himes, *If He Hollers Let Him Go,* p. 56
[226] Himes, *If He Hollers Let Him Go,* p. 56
[227] Chester Himes, *The Quality of Hurrt: The Early Years, The Autobiography of Chester Himes* (New York: Paragon, 1972), p. 78
[228] Himes, *The Quality of Hurrt: The Early Years, The Autobiography of Chester Himes,* p. 78

Americans that would move to Los Angeles during this period, 'doubling the existing black population in Southern California', and this context is crucial to understanding the novel.[229] The segregated neighborhoods and tensions between the African American community and their white neighbors may have an autobiographical origin. Lynn Itagaki describes *If He Hollers Let Him Go* as 'a failed bildungsroman', a story about a man that was promised success and finds that he was sold a false dream: 'in Los Angeles Bob encounters a new form of slavery and cowardice, something more pernicious than the lack of economic opportunities he experienced in Cleveland'.[230] She argues that Bob is a mirror for Himes, and represents a corrupt and misleading promise of the American Dream as he is 'transformed into the hunted racial body of America itself'.[231] In one scene early in the novel, Bob's faith in the American Dream is illustrated as he dresses for work. He describes feeling 'important' in his work clothes, as though he looks to have achieved the American Dream that he strives for: 'my working clothes made me feel rugged, bigger than the average citizen, stronger than a white-collar worker -stronger even than an executive. Important too'.[232]

Bob's story takes us on both sides of segregated Los Angeles: 'transversing the white Westside, the Harrisons' elite black Westside (28th and Western), and the seedy Southside of Central Avenue and downtown'.[233] Himes purposely takes his readership between these different neighborhoods to illustrate his point about the starkness of the segregation in the city, and the hypocrisy of the promise that this place is more progressive than the south. Bob spends the novel

[229] Lynn M. Itagaki, 'Transgressing Race and Community in Chester Himes's *If He Hollers Let Him Go', African American Review,* 37:1 (2003), pp. 65-80, p. 68
[230] Itagaki, p. 70
[231] Itagaki, p. 70
[232] Himes, *If He Hollers Let Him Go*, p. 45
[233] Itagaki, p. 72

'running after white people' and Himes uses the Harrison family as a tool for 'exposing the hypocrisy of the black middle-class community in Los Angeles'.[234] Itagaki writes that Himes' description of Mrs Harrison can be likened to an aristocratic old lady of the South that he fled, with 'a withered soul and body'.[235] She is 'smug and complacent' offers 'unflattering descriptions' of the African Americans, proud of Alice's ability to pass for white.[236] Itagaki writes that the Harrisons 'espouse white values and attitudes toward the black working class', a kind of privilege that Bob is not afforded and becomes irritated by throughout the novel.[237] Bob expresses both jealousy at Alice's passing for white, and a pride at being seen with her. Bob is attracted to how her passing race her 'position and prestige among her own people'.[238] Alice and Bob's relationship is Himes' symbol for the complexity of changing race relations in Los Angeles.

Black Identity and Culture

Himes' writing is centered around black identity and culture, he was a master of using fictional characters to voice concerns of a real community and references to jazz music in particular set the tone for a novel that discusses African American issues. Soitos calls this the 'blackground' of the novel, and lists references to African American culture as one of his key four tropes of black detection.[239] Christopher Gair writes that 'music assumes a racial significance, conveying a message that cannot be spoken in English'.[240] Jones compares jazz music to 'the sidewalks

[234] Itagaki, p. 70
[235] Itagaki, p. 71
[236] Itagaki, p. 70
[237] Itagaki, p. 71
[238] Itagaki, p. 72
[239] Soitos, *The Blues Detective: A Study of African American Detective Fiction*, p. 27
[240] Christopher Gair, 'Theory comes to Harlem: the New York novels of Chester Himes', Twentieth Century Literary Criticism, (2003), pp. 314-319, (p. 314)

trying to speak in a language never heard, but they can't spell it either', which can be interpreted as Jones trying to express the frustration of living as an African American, and not being understood by white America – he is speaking in a different language and is unable to explain how he feels.[241] Perhaps jazz music is a tool for this expression, and the reader learns that there is an element to living in America as an African American that cannot quite be put into words. Gair goes on to explain that 'jazz expresses both the history and, potentially, the solution to the African American urban experience'.[242] Later, whilst choosing an album from a jukebox, an onlooker describes *Laughing to Keep from Crying* by Lester Young as 'foreign'.[243] Jones snaps back 'no it ain't' and 'no one contradicted him'.[244] This short exchange tells the reader so much about Himes' attitude towards jazz music, and the importance of its inclusion in his novels. Within his writing, Himes uses his characters to discuss issues that affected the African American community in a direct and powerful way. Soitos summarises Himes' work by describing the Harlem Detective series as 'redemption through black power and self-identity'.[245] He says that Himes 'was able to work important blues detective tropes into his socially aware and highly critical texts, thereby using detective fiction to present African American social and political worldviews'.[246] The inclusion of references to jazz is an example of Himes using his stories as a reclamation of black identity. Himes himself sums up his intentions best in a 1993 interview: 'the Harlem of my books was never meant to be real; I never called it real; I just wanted to take it away from the white man if only in my books'.[247] Andrew Pepper describes Himes' Harlem as 'his fictionalized city is… to some extent, emblematic of a black 'every-

[241] Chester Himes, *Cotton Comes to Harlem*, (New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 1988), p. 34
[242] Gair, p. 314
[243] Himes, *Cotton Comes to Harlem*, p. 101
[244] Himes, *Cotton Comes to Harlem*, p. 101
[245] Soitos, 'Chester Himes: The Audacity of Blackness in Himes and His Harlem Detectives', p 66
[246] Soitos, 'Chester Himes: The Audacity of Blackness in Himes and His Harlem Detectives', p. 62
[247] Himes, *My Life of Absurdity: The Later Autobiography of Chester Himes*, p. 126

ghetto'.[248] 'Every-ghetto' is an interesting description, when it is remembered that Himes writes about African American issues across America. Peter Rabinowitz and H. Bruce Franklin describe Coffin Ed and Grace Digger as 'black-killer detectives' and argue that in so far as they impose the laws of white capitalist America upon the people of Harlem and do so with brutal and often blinding violence, they embody 'the ultimate stage of social disorder masquerading as order'.[249] In the reader's first introduction to the characters in *Cotton Comes to Harlem* their car passes by 'practically unseen, like a ghostly vehicle in the dark, its occupants invisible', an eerie foreboding of the violence that is to come.[250] 'Practically unseen' is an apt introduction to these two characters, who carry out their work under the cover of invisibility that their race presents them with in Harlem. In the conclusion to *Cotton Comes to Harlem*, a blind African American man who has played no part in the narrative until this point, produces a pistol and fires it 'wildly and indiscriminately' at a crowd, a 'symbolic register for the latent and unresolved frustrations of all the African American characters, as well as an emblemisation of the fragmented, undirected nature of black protest in the novel'.[251] Here, the chaos of Harlem acts as an intentionally confusing backdrop for a story about race.

The Harlem Cycle's Jones and Johnson are characters that protect the people of Harlem, a symbol for black America, and gain power through bringing criminals to justice. Racial solidarity between African American characters is an example of the 'connected to community' that Soitos discusses in his definition of black detection.[252] At one point in *Cotton Comes to Harlem*, Jones and Johnson are confused as to why witnesses to a robbery are unwilling to make

[248] Andrew Pepper, The Contemporary American Crime Novel: Race, Ethnicity, Gender, Class (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), p. 111
[249] Pepper, p. 113
[250] Pepper, p. 115
[251] Pepper, p. 113
[252] Soitos, *The Blues Detective: A Study of African American Detective Fiction*, p. 27

statements. Jones describes them as 'all stone blind' and Johnson quips 'what do you expect from people that are invisible themselves?'.[253] A feeling of 'invisiblity' within the African American community is not just a theme within Himes' writing, but also can be found in the work of many African American writers during the 20th century. The extent to which Jones and Johnson are intended to speak for all black people in Himes' *Harlem Cycle* series is a complicated question – they certainly represent a marginalized group but within Himes' work they share conflicting opinions with other African American characters. This technique of using a story about crime to hold a mirror up to the injustice experienced by the African American community is used throughout Himes' work. It is no coincidence that Himes casts black protagonists to tell stories about black lives, but his characters are far from blank canvases, rich with references to a real-life community. Himes' uses his complex, pensive and thoughtful characters to raise questions and debate with his readership about the issues that affect them.

[253] Himes, *Cotton Comes to Harlem*, p. 32

Walter Mosley and the Black Private Detective

Walter Mosley's Easy Rawlins series is a collection of novels that document the career and personal life of Ezekiel "Easy" Rawlins, a Los Angeles private detective. The character of Rawlins serves a dual purpose, as both the detective figure within these stories and a vessel for Mosley to discuss the racial discrimination that Rawlins faces as an African American living through the Civil Rights Movement. Published between 1990 and 2021, but set between 1945 and 1965, Mosley purposely chose this era to set his collection of stories in because it was framed by the campaigning for civil rights. This series begins in 1990, only 26 years after the passing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, with *Devil in a Blue Dress*. In this chapter, I will discuss the series as whole but will focus on *Devil in a Blue Dress* in particular, because this novel is a useful introduction to the major themes of Mosley's series: 'survival, financial independence, manhood, loyalty, and amorality'.[254]

In *Devil in a Blue Dress*, Easy is approached by Mr Dewitt Albright, a white corrupt businessman, and is offered employment in the pursuit of Daphne Monet, the 'devil in a blue dress'. Albright relies on Easy to find her, because he understands that he cannot enter spaces such as 'black clubs' or the neighborhood barbershop without 'drawing unnecessary attention to himself'.[255] Easy is cast in the role of detective here and begins his investigation. Easy finds Daphne, but learns that she is actually Ruby, an African American woman passing as white. After beginning a relationship with her, Easy learns about the discrimination that she has experienced, and decides to let her leave 'with her skin'. From violent stereotypes to residential

[254] Wilson, p. 44
[255] Charles E. Wilson Jr, *Walter Mosley: A Critical Companion*, (London: Greenwood Press, 2003), p.36

segregation, to the treatment of African American women in the American crime fiction genre, *Devil in a Blue Dress* introduces many themes that are discussed throughout Mosley's series. This novel is an example of Mosley using his writing as platforms for social critique, using literature as activism. 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.[256]

In each of the novels in this series, Easy investigates a literal, often violent and racially motivated, crime and eventually there is a criminal presented to the reader each time. Yet, there is an overarching secondary, unspoken investigation that Easy embarks upon throughout the series. This investigation is into the discrimination that Rawlins experiences as an African American man, a theme that defines the series and adds another dimension to Easy's purpose as a detective figure. For Easy, 'there is a double battle to be fought – on the one hand, the perennial American battle of civil rights…on the other, the battle of a man trying to do the right thing within his own community'.[257] *Devil in a Blue Dress* fulfills the hardboiled tradition - 'the tough detective in search of truth, the femme fatale, the mean streets, the cops who can't be trusted' – and this familiar, comfortable pattern 'allows Mosley to bring in a further reality, confronting readers with the enormities of racism'.[258] Davis theorises that 'by 1990 a large readership was ready for a more direct confrontation with the racial dynamics that corrupt so much of what happens in America'.[259] It is no secret that civil rights were at the forefront of the American consciousness at the time of writing. The hardboiled detective novel 'has always

[256] Thomas Woertche, 'Interview mit Walter Mosley' *Sirene*, (12:13), 1994, pp. 115-123 (p. 116)
[257] Mosley, *Devil in a Blue Dress*, p. 6
[258] J. Madison Davis, 'Expanding the World of the Private Eye: Walter Mosley Becomes a Grand Master', World Literature Today, 90:3-4 (2016) pp. 32-34, p. 34
[259] Davis, p. 34

promised a more direct expression of the harsher realities' and Mosley 'adapts the tradition to his own significant purposes'. [260]

Throughout Mosley's series, the crime is solved and an explanation is granted to the reader, but justice is not always served in an obvious way. For example, in *Devil in a Blue Dress*, Easy lets Daphne go and keeps her passing a secret, helping her to avoid the wrath of Mr Albright. Working outside the confines of the legal system, Easy is a detective figure that is left to create his own sense of justice, and often there is an aspect of racial solidarity in his decisions. Easy fulfils the readership's expectations of a hardboiled detective figure in that he is an 'outsider', a 'knight in somewhat tarnished armour', but his reason for feeling like an outsider is his race.[261] Easy is a protagonist with an 'unmistakable whiff of authenticity'; he is far from 'decorative' or 'comic relief' and he acts as a 'simulation of real people' in this series.[262]

Nicole King discusses the practice of writing retrospectively about political issues, reflecting on changes within the American political climate with the intention of 'offering new insights'.[263] As well as Mosley's *Devil in a Blue Dress*, King also references Andrea Lee's *Sarah Phillips* (1984) and Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987): 'generated the 1980s, these novels revisit earlier historical moments- Reconstruction, post-World War II, and the Civil Rights era- in order to nuance these quarrels'.[264] These writers aim to 'offer us new insights into the intertwined histories of racial up- lift and individualism on the one hand, and black American identity on the other'.[265] Like

[260] J, Madison Davis, p. 34
[261] Mosley, *Devil in a Blue Dress*, p. 5
[262] Davis, p. 32
[263] Nicole King, 'You Think Like You White": Questioning Race and Racial Community through the Lens of Middle-Class Desire(s)', *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*, 35:2/3 (2002), pp. 211-230, p. 212
[264] King, p. 220
[265] King, p. 218

Lee and Morrison, Mosley intentionally writes with the gift of hindsight, some fifty years after his novels were set. For example, one of the real-world 'quarrels' that is Mosley references in his novels is the migration of African Americans to large, American cities in search of 'individualism' and 'black American identity'.[266] In *Devil in a Blue Dress*, several characters - namely Easy, Joppy and Mouse - are African Americans that have migrated from Houston, Texas to Los Angeles, California, hoping to find a more progressive community. Of course, this movement of African Americans from the south of the USA to its large, northern cities is far from fiction. This has been named by historians as the Great Northward Migration or the Black Migration. The Smithsonian American Art Museum defines this as 'the movement of six million African Americans out of the rural Southern United States to the urban Northeast, Midwest and West between 1910 and 1970'.[267] This article cites the causes of this migration as 'poor economic and social conditions due to prevalent racial segregation and discrimination in the Southern states where Jim Crow laws were upheld'.[268] The growing Black presence outside the South changed the dynamics and demographics of numerous cities in the Northeast, Midwest, and West. In 1900, only 740,000 African Americans lived outside the South, and by 1970 this had risen to 10.6 million African Americans. However, the migrants that Easy represents were not free from racial discrimination in large cities such as Los Angeles, and Easy's experience with residential segregation and mortgage discrimination is far from fiction.

[266] King, p. 220
[267] Smithsonian American Art Museum, 'The Great Migration', p. 2
[268] Smithsonian American Art Museum, 'The Great Migration', p. 2

Easy is more than a detective in Mosley's novels, and his personal development forms a large part of the plot. Davis asserts that 'it is only recently that African Americans consistently became more than one-dimensional characters in crime novels, and Mosley's writing is often credited with changing this'.[269] McDermid argues that this reinvention happens because of Mosley's discussion of African American issues since 'his protagonist Easy Rawlins is black he brings a new perspective to the genre' and the 'novel shines an unforgiving light on the society it grows out of'.[270] J. Madison Davis writes that Easy Rawlins is a character that used 'powerful skills of logic and observation' to 'defend society against those who would undermine it'.[271] In the 2010 Serpent's Tail edition of *Devil in a Blue Dress*, Val McDermid opens her introduction with: 'one of the reasons for the ongoing success of crime fiction is the genre's ability continually to reinvent itself…what fuels that reinvention is writers who are innovative, ambitious and iconoclastic'.[272] Mosley's Easy Rawlins succeeds in this 'reinvention' the tropes of the detective figure with Easy Rawlins – there is an investigation, a slow reveal of clues and a grand reveal at the novel's conclusion, but Rawlins is set apart from his counterparts by a secondary, unspoken investigation. An 'implicit social commentary' is 'so much a part of the hard-boiled novel' and Mosley's novels aim to 'take advantage of the rise of pulp literature directed toward African Americans in the 1960s'.[273]

[269] Davis, p. 32
[270] Mosley, *Devil in a Blue Dress*, p. 5
[271] Davis, p. 32
[272] Val McDermid, *Devil in a Blue Dress* (London: Serpent's Tail, 2017), introduction
[273] Davis, p. 33

White Power and Extra-Legality

From the first pages of the Easy Rawlins series, the link between white power and the justice system is a defining feature of Easy's narration. The power that the white members of Easy's community hold controls much of the plot of these novels, and Mosley's criticism of the corrupt and institutionally racist American justice system forms a large part of the plot. In the opening scene of *Devil in a Blue Dress*, the character of Mr Albright is introduced: 'I was surprised to see a white man walk into Joppy's bar'.[274] Albright's power is subtly illustrated in his walking out without paying for any of the drinks that he had ordered and Joppy 'didn't seem in a hurry to ask for his money'.[275] In this interaction, Mosley sets a tone that continues throughout his series, introducing white power as a major theme within this series. The character of Mr Albright has a literal whiteness that is an obvious, and symbolic, aspect of his characterisation from the outset: 'he was white but he wore an off-white linen suit and shirt with a Panama straw hat and bone shoes over flashing white silk socks… his skin was smooth and pale'.[276] Mr Albright represents white power in Easy's community, using African Americans to commit crimes on his behalf, watching them be arrested or killed whilst he himself evades punishment.

From their first meeting, power and the threat of violence defines their relationship, Mr Albright sits opposite Easy with a 'white-leather shoulder holster under his left arm' and the 'muzzle of the pistol almost reached his belt'.[277] Even the white holster is a symbol of white power and reminds the reader of the inevitable power imbalance that Easy will fall victim to. It is

[274] Mosley, *Devil in a Blue Dress*, p. 8
[275] Mosley, *Devil in a Blue Dress*, p. 12
[276] Mosley, *Devil in a Blue Dress*, p. 8
[277] Mosley, *Devil in a Blue Dress*, p. 22

noteworthy that when new characters are introduced, their race is often the first feature of their description. When Easy meets associates of Mr Albright he describes them as 'a little white man', 'curly brown hair, dark skin like an India Indian' and 'looked a little like he was Chinese around the eyes, but when I looked at him again I wasn't so sure of his race'.[278] Easy thinks to himself: 'I would have liked to rip the skin from his face like I'd done once to another white boy', which reveals his subconscious association between violence and power, and the tensions between racial groups within his community.[279]

It is significant that Mr Albright consistently employs people of colour to do his violent jobs for him, and Easy quickly falls into this category. He tells Easy 'they're like you, Easy… there's a whole army of men who'll do specialized work for the right price'.[280] Easy tells himself that he would 'do whatever he wanted me to', sensing that Mr Albright was a path to money.[281] 'They're like you' makes it clear from the beginning of their relationship that Mr Albright does not see Easy as an equal, and is a man very aware of his position as a white American, and the advantages that his race gives him in evading punishment. A large motivation for Easy accepting Mr Albright's job is financial security, Albright senses his vulnerability as a man that is unemployed and with a mortgage. Wilson describes Easy's pursuit of owning property and being financial independent as 'the means by which he is freed from slavery'.[282] Wilson writes that 'if the black man has some money, then he will have at least some justice'.[283] Of course, this search for power in Mr Albright's employment is bittersweet, and Easy feels as though he is 'owned' by

[278] Mosley, *Devil in a Blue Dress*, p. 18
[279] Mosley, *Devil in a Blue Dress*, p. 19
[280] Mosley, *Devil in a Blue Dress*, p. 22
[281] Mosley, *Devil in a Blue Dress*, p. 18
[282] Wilson, p. 45
[283] Wilson, p. 45

Albright once he accepts his money, and so is again at the mercy of the white power that controls his community.[284]

An important aspect of Mr Albright's power as a white man is his immunity to the legal system. When asked about his occupation, Mr Albright simply introduces himself as 'just another fella who does favors for friends, and for friends of friends'.[285] Joppy defends Mr Albright, assuring Easy him that Albright 'ain't no gangster…just a man with a finger in a whole lotta pies, thats all'.[286] Easy expresses a fear of 'getting mixed up' in something illegal and sinister, and Mr Albright explains that as an African American he has always been 'mixed up' and people will always have prejudices about him being involved in underground, illegal activity, so he may as well profit from this.[287] He says: 'Easy, walk out your door in the morning and you're mixed up in something… the only thing you can really worry about is if you get mixed up to the top or not'.[288] Mr Albright explains to Easy, and indirectly to the reader themselves: 'that's why I want you to work for me. I don't like the police myself… the police enforce the law and you know what the law is, don't you? The law is made by the rich people so that the poor people can't get ahead. You don't want to get mixed up with the law and neither do I'.[289]

In the novel's conclusion, Easy reflects on Mr Albright's warning, and comes to the harsh realisation that he was correct. Easy explains to Odell that he has decided to begin a career carrying out private investigations and Odell expresses his concern for Easy getting involved in 'dangerous business'.[290] Easy replies with a summary of the lesson he learned from his encounter

[284] Wilson, p. 45
[285] Mosley, *Devil in a Blue Dress,* p. 11
[286] Mosley, *Devil in a Blue Dress,* p. 14
[287] Mosley, *Devil in a Blue Dress,* p. 23
[288] Mosley, *Devil in a Blue Dress,* p. 23
[289] Mosey, *Devil in a Blue Dress,* p. 23
[290] Mosley, *Devil in a Blue Dress,* p. 185

with Mr Albright: 'you know a man could end up dead just crossin' the street... least this way I say I earned it'.[291] Easy has learned the difficult lesson that the American law enforcement system will not protect African Americans and he sees it as his responsibility to protect his community. Easy asks Odell 'if you know a man is wrong, I mean, if you know he did somethin' bad but you don't turn him in to the law because he's your friend, do you think that's right?'.[292] Odell replies 'all you got is your friends, Easy'.[293] Here, the complicated nature of the American legal system is summarised, Mosley discusses the mistrust felt towards law enforcement within the African American community, and his confusion at white Americans such as Albright getting away with 'somethin' bad' unpunished.

In the conclusion to *Devil in a Blue Dress*, Easy reveals that he has been inspired to begin a career as a private detective, for 'people I know and people they know'.[294] Easy understands that his work must exist outside of the confines of the legal system, and his awareness of his investigative advantage as an African American is proof of his double consciousness. Easy works outside the law, often resorting to using violent methods of getting information during his investigation that a police detective could not. A police detective must carry out investigations in a prescribed, supervised fashion but since he works independently Easy is seemingly free to threaten suspects. Easy is forced to gather his evidence in forceful and sometimes violent ways since he does not have the resources of a police department available to him. An example of this is a scene in which Easy offers five hundred dollars in exchange for information: 'I need to talk to you. I gotta deal for you, make us both five hundred dollars'.[295] This encounter quickly turns

[291] Mosley, *Devil in a Blue Dress*, p, 185
[292] Mosley, *Devil in a Blue Dress*, p. 185
[293] Mosley, *Devil in a Blue Dress*, p. 185
[294] Mosley, *Devil in a Blue Dress*, p. 185
[295] Mosley, *Devil in a Blue Dress*, p. 129

violent, and a knife is held to Easy's throat. A police officer could not have bribed a witness and would have been able to arrest him once he assaulted and threatened them – instead Easy is left to defend himself.

In *The Contemporary American Crime Novel: Race, Ethnicity, Gender, Class* by Andrew Pepper describes how writers such as Mosley and Himes use the hardboiled genre as a space to discuss political topics, such as institutional racism within the justice system. Pepper reminds us that 'the cultural politics of the hard-boiled detective, for example, have always been deeply ambivalent'.[296] Characters such as Mr Albright are no coincidence, and their crimes are 'shown to be an inevitable part of the institutional superstructure of American life'.[297] As well as serving a role in the plot of the novel, Albright also 'reveals much about the 1960s and 1990s and much about the extent to which black cultural politics and racial-ethnic relations have both changed and remained the same'.[298]

Charles E. Wilson Jr summarizes Easy as a man who has simply 'learned how to adopt practical strategies in order to surmount obstacles'.[299] Amorality is a secondary theme of Mosley's novel here, with African American characters presented as surviving using 'whatever methods present themselves'.[300] For example, Easy works for a corrupt, violent and amoral man like Mr Albright, finding few other offers of employment that pay as well, to pay his mortgage. Similarly, Daphne Monet runs away with a share of thirty thousand dollars, but if this money belongs to rich, cruel and powerful people it could be argued that taking this money was the moral choice to make. In

[296] Pepper, p. 12
[297] Pepper, p. 15
[298] Pepper, p. 13
[299] Wilson, p. 47
[300] Wilson, p. 47

a later novel in the series, *Rose Gold*, Easy is approached by a senior LAPD detective and asked to take on a case, in the knowledge that Easy has access to certain spaces and investigative techniques as an African American. This is a reminder that, despite his talent as a detective, he is still not recognized by the police and is forced to offer his services privately; he must live with racial prejudice affecting his work every day. As a private detective Easy is not concerned with bringing people to justice through the legal system, but in the conclusion of each case, Easy offers the reader a sense of justice and closure, nonetheless.

Violence and the Pursuit of Manhood

Violence and race are themes that have become synonymous with one another in crime fiction. An aspect of Easy's identity that Mosley routinely reminds his readership of is his history serving in the US military during the Second World War. Charles E. Wilson Jr writes that Easy's character is 'the consummate survivor' and reminds us that the 'skills that he developed during the war' are what allows him to manoeuvre and manipulate a situation to his advantage'.[301] *Devil in A Blue Dress* has an undeniable undertone of violence – Mosley's series includes countless examples of characters killing, torturing, or assaulting others. From the systematic racism within the justice system, to the prejudice of police officers, to the link between African American characters and organised crime, the crime fiction genre has a history of misrepresenting black characters. Easy's history within the army is made clear from the outset – Joppy explains 'he's a war hero, Mr. Albright. Easy went in with Patton. Volunteered! You know he seen him some blood'.[302] Hints at the violence that will follow can be seen from even the first few scenes of the

[301] Wilson, p. 44
[302] Mosley, *Devil in a Blue Dress*, p. 10

novel; Joppy is a boxer, 'ranked number seven in 1932' and known for the 'violence he brought to the ring'.[303] Here, the link between violence and African American characters is outlined in the first pages of the series. White power and racial politics are central to every story in the Easy Rawlins series, and Mosley makes it clear that the violence shown is born of these deeper rooted social justice issues.

Another example of white power within this series include an instance in *Black Betty* where Easy operates his real estate deal through a front because he fears having his investors know that he, the primary stakeholder, is black. In the novel's conclusion, Easy loses his real-estate investment when his agent sells him out to a group of rich white men. In *Bad Boy Brawly Brown*, Easy attends a meeting for a black power group, which is raided by the police, another display of white power and its roots in the American justice system. He finds himself under investigation by covert federal agents and discovers a dark side of arms dealing within the group. Similarly, in *Cinnamon Kiss*, Easy is a legitimate, licensed private investigator, only granted this after co-operating with the police in *Little Scarlet*; it is significant that Easy only finds power when it is granted to him by the institutionally racist law enforcement. Torres describes Easy as 'both an insider and an outsider'; despite being a successful and talented detective, he is not taken seriously by the police department in Los Angeles.[304] 'Easy lives on the edge between different worlds and different cultures, and endeavours to reinvent himself by constructing a space in which he can achieve respect and recognition'.[305]

[303] Mosley, *Devil in a Blue Dress*, p. 13
[304] Agustin Reyes Torres, *Walter Mosley's Detective Novels: The creation of a Black Subjectivity* (Valencia, Spain: Publicacions de la Universitat de València, 2008), p. 15
[305] Torres, p. 15

The black detective figure is a complicated literary archetype in crime fiction, designed to both solve crime and act as a screen for social commentary to be projected on throughout their investigation. Despite working as detectives, many of these characters are not taken as seriously as their white counterparts, and struggle to find legitimacy in their investigations. Black detective figures experience prejudice in their personal lives and in a professional capacity, from others that they work with in the justice system. It is perhaps inevitable that novels with black detective protagonists would be about institutional racism in the justice system, and a social commentary would be formed on the issues affecting the African American community. *Devil in A Blue Dress* is a novel about a detective figure investigating a crime, but the crimes that he solves also act as a backdrop for his own exploration of self. Goeller summarizes this: 'although the overt mysteries in Mosley's novels are always solved, his protagonist's personal mystery, his identity, remains elusive, shifting, and tenuous'.[306] This is a theme that continues throughout the Easy Rawlins series; for example, in *Blood Grove* (2021), the latest installment of the series, Easy owns his own detective agency and is employed in the investigation of a murder in the San Fernando Valley, the victim being a white woman attacked by an African American man. In a review for *The Washington Post*, Maureen Corrigan writes: 'the central mystery in "Blood Grove" — as in all the Easy Rawlins books — is as much about the brazen contradictions of American society as it is about what happened in that orange grove one night'.[307]

Despite being a story centering around an investigation into a crime, Corrigan reflects that 'the racial identities of those involved' are a 'complicating factor'.[308] The discussion of the racist

[306] Alison D. Goeller, 'Identity Politics: The Private Eye ("I") in Walter Mosley's Detective Fiction', in *Polar Noir: Reading African-American Detective Fiction*, ed Alice Mills and Claude Julien, (2017), pp. 149-161, (p. 161)
[307] Corrigan, para. 9 of 9
[308] Maureen Corrigan, *Walter Mosley's New Easy Rawlins Book is a Masterful Mix of Mystery and Social Commentary*, (2021) https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/books/walter-mosleys-new-easy-rawlins-book-is-a-masterful-mix-of-mystery-and-social-commentary/2021/02/04/412318f6-649f-11eb-8468-21bc48f07fe5_story.html#:~:text=Walter%20Mosley%27s%20new%20Easy%20Rawlins,of%20mystery%20and%20social%20commentary&text=There%20comes%20a%20moment%20in,no%20idea%20what%27s%20going%20on. [Accessed on 6 November 2023] (para. 5 of 9)

justice system, and the feeling among the African American community that they cannot rely on the police to protect them, is central to Mosley's stories.

Easy hears an 'internal voice' or 'alter ego' outside of himself speaking to him at points within Mosley's series.[309] The voice 'commands him' in 'unapologetically vulgar language' at several points throughout the series.[310] The first instance that Easy hears this voice is during his time serving in World War II, trapped in a barn under seige by a sniper. The voice commands Easy to attack the sniper 'like a real warrior' and Easy obeys.[311] Easy emerges from this scenario victorious, and he quickly places his blind faith in the voice in this moment: 'he just tells me how it is if I want to survive'.[312] The voice repeats 'bide yo' time an' take advantage wherever you can', and this becomes a mantra of Easy's as he aims to 'take advantage' of the power that he has been granted by his white peers such as Mr Albright.[313] Wilson reminds us that the voice and Easy are designed to be 'two distinct personalities', another example of Easy acting as Daphne's double.[314] Just as Easy relies on the voice for survival, Ruby relies on her alter ego of Daphne Monet to survive.

Yet, it remains unclear if the voice is a literary device, or a literal symptom of hallucinations born from PTSD that Easy developed during a traumatic experience in the war. Wilson reminds us that Easy represents a generation of African American men that were expected to volunteer their lives for a military that 'still condoned segregated units' and 'generally denied [African

[309] Wilson, p. 44
[310] Wilson, p. 44
[311] Wilson, p. 44
[312] Mosley, *Devil in a Blue Dress*, p. 99
[313] Mosley, *Devil in a Blue Dress*, p. 97
[314] Wilson, p. 44

American men] the privilege of combat'.[315] Easy fought 'not for America, but for his own dignity' and sees himself as 'defending his honour and his race'.[316] Wilson writes that Easy lives in the pursuit of 'the respect of white men', and after a demoralizing experience in the war he imagines that owning property may be the key to this respect: 'in the war, it was combat; in the real world, it is financial stability'.[317]

Shift in Dialect

Since he does not carry out his investigation under the arms of any branch of the justice system, much of Easy's investigations as a private detective are conducted by making small talk in bars, specifically those frequented by African American customers. His niche as a detective in Los Angeles is his ability to access spaces where white policemen cannot: 'nobody knew what I was up to and that made me sort of invisible'.[318] 'Invisible' is a significant word choice when it is remembered that *Devil in a Blue Dress* explores Rawlins' struggle to find an identity in Los Angeles. This shifting between dialects is a subversive act that aids his sleuthing: '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'.[319] John Gruesser argues that this 'alienates him from his own black community' and Rawlins is 'juggling linguistic and social codes to deceive both black and white characters'.[320] Rawlins also experiences a shift from 'Easy' to 'Mr Rawlins' when speaking with white clientele, and the

[315] Wilson, p. 46
[316] Wilson, p. 46
[317] Wilson, p. 46
[318] Mosley, *Devil in a Blue Dress,* p. 112
[319] Goeller, p. 151
[320] John Cullen Gruesser, 'An Un-Easy Relationship: Walter Mosley's Signifyin(g) Detective and the Black Community', *In Gosselin,* pp. 235-255, (p. 235)

language that Rawlins uses also changes depending on who he is speaking with, using African American Vernacular English at times. He 'exploits his Southern roots and manners to gain information'.[321]

Daphne Monet, the 'devil in a blue dress' is his double in this respect – she is revealed to be a black woman named Ruby, who also changes her mannerisms and language to pass as a white woman. Mouse quips 'you just like Ruby.... you think like you white but brother you don't know that you both poor'.[322] It is interesting to note that Rawlins' inner 'voice' flips between using an African American Vernacular and standard English, proof of the depth of his internal conflict with his identity. Albright shows Easy a photograph of Daphne Monet, and suggests that he has chosen Easy to befriend her because 'Daphne has a predilection for the company of Negroes. She likes jazz and pigs' feet and dark meat, if you know what I mean'.[323] Albright's power is hinted at here, and he reminds Easy that he has used him to gain access to Daphne, knowing that she would not speak to him willingly. Easy has access to places as an African American that Mr Albright does not, and he wishes to pay him to exploit this: 'you see, I can't go in those places looking for her because I'm not the right persuasion'.[324] Mr Albright 'does not think that he can enter such places without drawing unnecessary attention to himself' – his point is proven when Easy goes to 'John's Place' a popular black nightclub and is 'accosted on the sidewalk by a drunken white man who begs Easy to help him gain passage into the club'.[325] This image is significant, and it illustrates Easy's advantage as an African American detective, and his skill at adapting to the expectations of the people around him.

[321] Gruesser, p. 235
[322] Mosley, *Devil in a Blue Dress*, p. 177
[323] Mosley, *Devil in a Blue Dress*, p. 23
[324] Mosley, *Devil in a Blue Dress*, p. 23
[325] Wilson, p. 36

Residential Segregation

Another theme in Mosley's writing is residential segregation, and Rawlins' desire to own property. In *Devil in a Blue Dress*, Rawlins begins working as a detective in order to fund the properties that he has been accumulating, and only continues because he finds that he is talented and working as a private detective is a source of income that he has control over. He sees property as a necessary commodity in a capitalist society: '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'.[326] Throughout the series, Rawlins eventually buys property, even owning a small office in central Los Angeles. This is a recurring theme throughout Mosley's work and in *Little Scarlet* he writes about the Watts Riots in Los Angeles, a very real protest about the residential segregation in the city. This event is retold through the eyes of Rawlins, who does not participate in the riots, but observes the violence that grips his city, describing it as a 'five-day eruption of rage that had been simmering for centuries'.[327] In post-World War II Los Angeles, the housing market grew explosively, and African American residents were barred from buying property in white neighborhoods using a variety of methods. The Rumford Fair Housing Act of 1964 aimed to eradicate this issue but was largely unsuccessful and sparked the Watts Riots the following year. Mosley's novels describe a clear line between white and black neighborhoods, with white LAPD police officers refusing to investigate crimes in black neighborhoods. An LAPD officer named Melvin Suggs, for example, comes to Easy's office asking for help when investigating a

[326] Mosley, *Devil in a Blue Dress*, p. 15
[327] Mosley, *Little Scarlet*, (New York: Thorndike Press, 2004), p. 7

crime that took place during the riots, fearing that white police officers investigating this crime might incite further violence.

It is also important to remember that Easy is an example of another theme in crime fiction: the tradition of black soldiers fighting in the war, only to come home and be disappointed at the lack of effort put into tackling racial discrimination. Racial prejudice and violence are themes that define this novel, and the reader is often reminded of the sacrifice that Rawlins made whilst serving his country. In *Red Death*, Mosley's sequel to *Devil in a Blue Dress*, Easy becomes a landlord and owns several apartment buildings across Los Angeles. It is important to note that even this success of Easy's is bittersweet, since he must run this business through a hired, white front man.

Treatment of Women

Mosley's Easy Rawlins series also offers complicated depictions of black women, often overly sexualised, and victims of violent crimes at the hands of their male counterparts. In *Devil in a Blue Dress*, Daphne Monet acts as Rawlins' double in many ways, holding a mirror up to his identity crisis when she reveals herself to be a black woman passing as white. It is difficult to pinpoint when the tradition of racial passing became a popular theme within African American literature. Critics such as Sinead Moynihan and Juda Bennett suggest that the tradition became popular throughout the 20th century, and was at its most popular during 'a period stretching from post-Reconstruction to the Civil Rights Movement (the 1890s to the 1960s)… peaking with the

literary output of the Harlem Renaissance'.[328] Werner Sollors observes that racial passing is 'particularly a phenomenon of the late nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century' and adds that it was 'swept aside in social history by the civil rights movement'.[329] Daphneis also a detective figure within the novel in her own right, carrying out an investigation of her own, using seduction as an investigative method. This stereotyping of black women in crime fiction is a trope of the genre within itself; these characters are largely sex objects like Daphne Monet, or 'mammy' figures like Barbara Neely's Blanche Lam.

Devil in a Blue Dress offers a femme fatale in Daphne Monet, a complex, African American, female character; she is the 'devil in a blue dress', the mysterious love interest at the heart of the novel, that Easy is hired to find, and eventually begins a relationship with. Despite being objectified from the outset, as her fiancé pays Rawlins to find her after she runs away, it could be argued that her she finds power in her seduction of Rawlins. She successfully uses her sexuality to lure and distract Rawlins from his investigation and survives the novel. There is an undeniably sexual element to the abuse that Daphne experiences, with the men around her having a preoccupation with the potential to have sex with her, as she tries to squeeze information out of them.

Sex is a by-product of a wider investigation for Daphne, who merely sees it as an investigative technique. Daphne's effect on Easy is clear, after spending the night 'screaming and wrestling' with her he confesses 'if she wanted me to bleed, I would have been happy to open a vein'.[330]

[328] Sinead Moynihan, *Passing into the Present: Contemporary American Fiction of Racial and Gender Passing*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010), p. 2
[329] Werner Sollors, *Neither Black Nor White Yet Both*, (New York: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 2
[330] Mosley, *Devil in a Blue Dress*, p. 158

This objectification is all the more tragic when it is considered that she only moved to Los Angeles in the first instance in a desperate attempt to escape an incestuous, abusive relationship with her father. It is vital to remember that the character of Daphne serves a dual purpose – not only is she a victim of prejudice as a woman, but also as a black woman. Tasker describes her as functioning 'primarily as a screen onto which other concerns are projected', a common theme for female characters in this genre, who are largely created as a tool to allow the reader to learn more about the male characters that the novel centres around.[331]

Easy himself explains it best when he describes her as a 'chameleon lizard' who is forced to change to suit 'her man'.[332] Another duality of Daphne can be found in her dominant, strong nature whilst also being in need of protection; she is shown as simultaneously feminine and masculine. Her intelligence and wit, combined with her need to be 'saved' creates a complex narrative, as she takes on many roles within this novel. Published in 1990, but set in 1948, Mosley uses the character of Daphne to explore the changes in the treatment of African American women during this time. Despite being an example of a relatively progressive portrayal of a black woman in crime fiction, Daphne is still largely treated with prejudice throughout the novel, and is sexualised from the outset. Daphne is a symbol of a racially divided Los Angeles, and the revelation that she is 'passing' as a white woman at the end of the novel is proof of the inner conflict that she experiences in her life as a black woman.

Upon the revelation in the novel's conclusion that Daphne Monet is actually Ruby Hanks, an African American woman, as opposed to a white one, Mouse explains to Easy: 'she wanna be

[331] Yvonne Tasker, *Working Girls: Gender and Sexuality in Popular Cinema*, (London: Routeledge, 1998) p. 30
[332] Mosley, *Devil in a Blue Dress*, p. 159

white…all them years people be tellin' her how she light-skinned and beautiful but all the time she knows that she can't have what white people have… she look like she white and you think like you white… but brother you don't know that you both poor niggers… and a nigger ain't never gonna be happy 'less he accept what he is'.[333] Easy decides to let Daphne 'get away with her money and her skin'.[334] Daphne is a symbol of the discrimination that the African American community suffered, and her decision to pass for white is a noteworthy beginning to the series here.

In *A Chosen Exile: A History of Racial Passing in American Life,* Allyson Hobbs describes racial passing as 'an exile' - the act of being caught in a space between 'the delight of 'fooling white folks' and prevailing over an unjust racial regime' and the 'agony of losing one's sense of self'.[335] Hobbs reflects on the trend of discussing racial passing in literature throughout the 20th century, and how literature presented characters passing for white as 'liminal figures who were tormented by the racially degraded black society in which they lived and the white society into which they would never be accepted'.[336] Mosley's Daphne Monet is an excellent example of this, fully accepted by neither Mr Albright or by Easy. Daphne is far from a 'liminal figure' or caricature and expresses her own opinions on her decision to pass for white. Easy compares the revelation that Daphne is not white to 'an earthquake', and in this moment his entire perception of her changes: 'the ground under me seemed to shift… I looked at her to see the truth but it wasn't there'.[337] In the conversation that follows this, Easy learns about Daphne's motivations for living this double life, and through this a discussion about racial passing also occurs between

[333] Mosley, *Devil in a Blue Dress,* p. 177
[334] Mosley, *Devil in a Blue Dress,* p. 179
[335] Allyson Hobbs, *A Chosen Exile: A History of Racial Passing in American Life,* (New York: Harvard University Press, 2016), p. 176
[336] Hobbs, p. 176
[337] Mosley, Devil in a Blue Dress, p.

Mosley and his readership. Hobbs describes this trend of using literature to converse about politics as a product of the Harlem Renaissance: 'the Harlem Renaissance ushered in transformations in African American life and presented African Americans as they had never been seen before - as artists, as intellectuals, and as fully formed individuals, not grotesque caricatures'.[338] (177) Mosley's characters are purposefully designed to be 'fully formed individuals', because they serve as mouthpieces for real life individuals that are affected by the issues discussed.[339]

In *It Takes One to Know One: Passing and Communities of Common Interest,* Amy Robinson compares the act of passing to 'Brechtian drag', a term used in theatre to describe an actor that plays more than one character on stage. Ruby certainly plays a character that is far from her true self in Daphne Monet, and Robinson describes this as 'a perverse pleasure of duping the dupe'.[340] Daphne also uses her sex appeal as a 'white' woman to 'dupe' white men, for her own benefit; she is light-skinned and beautiful' but is haunted by the knowledge that 'she knows that she can't have what white people have'.[341] Robinson describes passing as 'triangular', a relationship between three parties: the passing individual, their African American community that must be abandoned to pass successfully, and the duped white community that they enter.[342] Robinson also points out an argument for African Americans only being able to pass for white among their white peers, and not experiencing this privilege among other African Americans. In his 1946 essay, 'The World and the Jug', Ralph Ellison claims that 'although the sociologists tell

[338] Hobbs, p. 177
[339] Hobbs, p. 177
[340] Amy Robinson, 'It Takes One to Know One: Passing and Communities of Common Interest', *Critical Inquiry*, 20:4 (1994) pp. 715-736, p. 715
[341] Mosley, *Devil in a Blue Dress*, p. 177
[342] Robinson, p. 716

us that thousands of light skinned Negro become White each year undetected, most Negroes can spot a paper thin 'White Negro' every time'.[343] 715. Similarly Charles Gibson, who had himself passed for white, argues in his 1931 essay 'Concerning Color', that 'there is an undescribable something which enables a Negro to spot a passer sometimes at a glance, and no doubt, this accounts for the large number of colored doormen at theaters, dining rooms and other exclusive places'.[344] This is true for Daphne, who hides from her African American peers such as Easy for fear of being exposed.

She also serves as a representation of the objectification and oppression experienced by women. Much of Easy's description of their relationship is centred around her sexuality; in one scene he watches her being raped and assaulted. 'Daphne was on the couch, naked, and the men, DeWitt and Joppy, stood over her… I saw that white man choking Daphne'.[345] Sexualisation, race and violence go hand-in-hand in this novel, and the character of Daphne Monet largely acts as an illustration of all three of these themes. It is especially noteworthy that Daphne has experienced this objectification and assault since her childhood. She recalls when her father used to take her to the zoo as a child, and the lessons that she learned from this experience: 'always at first he'd kiss me like a father and his little girl but then we'd get alone someplace and act like real lovers… after he'd cry so sweet and beg me to forgive him'.[346] She compares her experience as an African American woman to being like a caged animal: 'you can learn from them, Easy… the zoo animals can teach you… I felt just like that ape. Swinging wildly from one wall to another; pretending I had somewhere to go. But I was trapped in my life just like that monkey'.[347] Easy

[343] Ralph Ellison, 'The World and the Jug', *Shadow and Act* (New York: Random House, 1972), p. 107
[344] Charles Gibson, 'Concerning Color', *The Psychoanalytic Review*, 18, (1931), p. 413
[345] Mosley, *Devil in a Blue Dress*, p, 171
[346] Mosley, *Devil in a Blue Dress*, p. 165
[347] Mosley, *Devil in a Blue Dress*, p. 164

begins to empathise with her in this moment, and understands her choice to pass for white: 'anyone with eyes could see that she was crazy from all those years of being locked away'.[348] Just like Easy describes having a 'voice' inside of him telling him to do whatever it takes to survive as an African American, to 'take advantage whenever you can', Ruby has developed the false persona of Daphne as a survival technique. Charles E. Wilson Jr describes this as merely an 'attempt to survive and retain sanity' and 'flee the experience of that young girl' by a woman 'plagued with race'.[349] Daphne has been a victim of sexualisation and sexual assault since childhood, and her sense of hopelessness is given as an explanation for her decision to pass as white.

On one occasion Daphne tries to explain how performative the African American experience is, how carefully she feels that she must control her behaviour when in the company of white people. She tells Easy 'us here, like we aren't who they want us to be'.[350] When Easy asks who 'they' are, she replies vaguely 'they don't have names…they're just the ones who won't let us be ourselves… they never want us to feel this good or close like this'.[351] Easy compares Daphne to a 'devil' with 'evil in every pocket'.[352] He says 'her face was beautiful… more beautiful than the photograph'.[353] Her racial ambiguity is described from the pair's first meeting; her hair is 'so light brown that you might have called it blond from a distance' and her eyes are 'either green or blue depending on how she held her head'.[354] She has bruises on her face, and when Easy questions her about this she dismisses him with a simple 'nuthin''.[355] It is significant that

[348] Mosley, *Devil in a Blue Dress,* p. 164
[349] Wilson, p. 45
[350] Mosley, *Devil in a Blue Dress,* p. 158
[351] Mosley, *Devil in a Blue Dress,* p. 158
[352] Mosley, *Devil in a Blue Dress,* p. 127
[353] Mosley, *Devil in a Blue Dress,* p. 80
[354] Mosley, *Devil in a Blue Dress,* p.80
[355] Mosley, *Devil in a Blue Dress,* p. 80

Daphne's 'beauty' here is more important to Easy than her 'evil', and he does little to help her when he sees that she has been assaulted. Charles E. Wilson Jr describes Daphne as a woman 'caught in the web of circumstance' and at the mercy of the white men around her that hold a power over her. Wilson goes on to argue that Daphne is 'like DeWitt and Mouse in that she uses whatever is at her disposal to survive'. In this example, this is her body; Daphne uses her body as a tool to appease the men around her and use her sexuality as a weapon. Of course, this is a false sense of power that she experiences, and the men around her are aware that they are being used.

Barbara Neely and the Black Domestic Detective

In 1992, an African American writer named Barbara Neely published *Blanche on the Lam*, the first of four novels featuring a middle-aged African American domestic worker and amateur detective named Blanche White. In each of these stories, Blanche solves a crime, using her resourcefulness, charisma, and an understanding of her invisibility as a domestic worker to carry out a covert investigation. Neely uses free indirect discourse to form a social commentary throughout her narration, intentionally placing the historically marginalized character of the black female domestic worker at the centre of her series. An important aspect of Blanche's characterization is her adherence to the 'mammy' character that is expected of her by her white employers. Yet, when she is alone Neely reveals that Blanche is very different from the character that she plays. Fully aware of her double consciousness as an African American woman, Blanche has learned how to use her 'mammy' disguise as a protective shield, behind which she gains access to the private lives of those around her and conducts her investigations. Through Blanche, Neely aimed to subvert the stereotype of the 'mammy' figure and the racism and sexism underpinning this characterization. From prejudices surrounding the 'mammy' stereotype, to the reliance on gossip, covert observation and communicating with a network of other domestic workers as an investigative tool, to the debate around black 'authenticity', passing and prejudice within the African American community, through Blanche Neely offers insight into issues faced by African American women. These are themes that define this series of fours novels - *Blanche on the Lam* (1992), *Blanche Among the Talented Tenth* (1994), *Blanche Cleans Up* (1998) and *Blanche Passes Go* (2000).

The black domestic figure was a character seen within American fiction, a notable example being Margaret Mitchell's *Gone With the Wind*, a 1936 novel that depicts a domestic figure named only as 'Mammy'. 'Mammy' is a slave that has been owned by a white family, the focus of the story, for three generations and is 'head woman of the plantation'.[356] A more recent example is Kathryn Stockett's 2009 novel *The Help,* which follows Aibileen Clark, an African American domestic worker that works for white employers in 1960's Mississippi. This character, an African American woman and domestic worker, fulfils the role of the detective and protagonist. This character was traditionally flat and lived in the background of stories centred around white families. Telling a story from this viewpoint offered Barbara Neely the opportunity to use her Blanche White series to discuss issues affecting the African American community. Daylanne English, writes that Blanche is 'a new sort of detective'; she is black, female and working class, qualities that 'drive the novel's content'.[357] Blanche's identity permits Neely to 'examine race and class from the point of view of a working-class black woman' and as well as to solve the crimes in front of her she is able to 'investigate the nature of blackness, past, and present'.[358] Blanche's 'nosiness' lands her at the centre of mysteries, violent crimes and danger time and time again.[359] From murders, forgeries of wills, theft and rape, Blanche finds herself at the scene of countless crimes and takes it upon herself to solve them.

Throughout these stories, Neely uses Blanche as an opportunity to tell stories about life as an African American woman, from the perspective of a domestic worker who has a unique insight into the lives of her white employers. Blanche has a unique skill for using her invisibility to

[356] Margaret Mitchell, *Gone With the Wind*, (New York City: Simon and Schuster, 2008), p. 113
[357] Daylanne K. English, 'The Modern in the Postmodern: Walter Mosley, Barbara Neely, and the Politics of Contemporary African-American Detective Fiction', *American Literary History*, 18:4 (2006), pp. 772-796, (p. 787)
[358] English, p. 786
[359] English, p. 787

investigate crimes undetected. Erin Pirklwas writes that 'the character of Blanche carries out her investigations not with the intention of having a criminal arrested and punished, but rather in pursuit of truth' and she is aided in her investigations by 'her curiosity, and her ability to piece together clues in order to figure out mysteries'.[360] These are characteristics that subvert the 'mammy' stock character and empower Blanche throughout her series.

Of course, it must be remembered that Neely began working as an activist before she turned to literature, and her career as a writer can be taken as an extension of her earlier work; she created a community-based housing program for female felons, was a director of a YMCA branch, executive director of Women for Economic Justice and cofounder of Women of Color for Reproductive Freedom. Neely 'taught prison inmates, fought for abortion rights, assailed violence against women and, through her activism and storytelling, ennobled working mothers, defied stereotypes and confronted bigotry and class discrimination, both directed against blacks and within the black community'.[361] Neely's shift to writing literature came in the form of a short story called 'Passing the Word', published in *Essence* magazine in 1981. Neely's work and the crime plot became a means to explore her beliefs about race and class in America. *Blanche on the Lam* is the most 'overtly political' of the four novels within Neely's series, tackling topics of 'black women's liberation from racism, sexism, heterosexism and classism' all in the space of one novel.[362] When she died in 2020, her *New York Times* obituary described her as an 'activist turned mystery writer', and her family described how her inspiration for her writing often came from her own diaries, 'making up stories from her daily experiences'.[363] She seamlessly wove political and social commentary into her novels, relying on her real-life experience working as a

[360] Erin Pirklwas, 'Barbara Neely', *Voices From the Gaps* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota, 1996), p. 3
[361] Sam Roberts, 'Barbara Neely, Activist Turned Mystery Writer, Dies at 78', *The New York Times*, (12 March 2020) p.13
[362] Reddy, 'Women Detectives', p. 204
[363] Roberts, p. 13

maid for a family in Jamestown to connect with readers.[364] Female African American writers such as Neely, Eleanor Taylor Bland and Ann Petry offer valuable additions to a traditionally male-dominated genre, and are able to discuss feminist issues from a vantage point that their male counterparts cannot: 'feminist crime fiction gives voice to an immense variety of commitments, struggles and situations'.[365] DuBois' theory was later expanded upon by 21st century critics who argued for 'triple-conciousness', when an African American also experiences prejudice as a result of another factor such as gender, sexuality or ethnicity.[366] An 'extra layer of meaning' is applied to the female characters that these women wrote about, and their accounts of the intersectional sexism that they write about become journalistic in nature.[367]

The 'Mammy' Figure and 'Pleasant Stupidity'

The 'mammy' character is defined as an African American woman, presented as maternal and compliant in a role of servitude to white employers. Chanequa Walker-Barnes defines the mammy as 'an older woman, overweight and dark skinned… an idealized figure of a caregiver: aimable, loyal, maternal, non-threatening, obedient and submissive… who demonstrates deference to white authority'.[368] A degree of flatness traditionally defines this character but, through Blanche White, Neely cleverly subverts the mammy figure by showing Blanche as actively, consciously performing this role and behaving very differently when she is not being observed. This 'behind the scenes' look at the mammy figure allows Neely to form a commentary on the sexism and racism that this characterisation perpetuates. Blanche describes

[364] Roberts, p. 13
[365] Wesson, p. 22
[366] Petra R. Rivera, 'Triple Consciousness', *Transition* (2011) pp. 156-163 (p.156)
[367] Wesson, p. 22
[368] Chanequa Walker-Barnes, Too Heavy a Yoke: Black Women and the Burden of Strength, (Oregon: Cascade Books, 2014), p. 85

performing a type of 'pleasant stupidity' around her white employers and behaves in a manner that they may expect of their domestic workers.[369] On one occasion, Blanche compares working for a white family to 'negotiating enemy territory', and the mammy character is the protective armour that she wears.[370] In this chapter, I will discuss the tropes that define the mammy, and how Neely uses this character as a space to discuss issues such as pressure placed on African American women to provide in a maternal role, prejudices surrounding domestic workers, and beauty standards for African American women.

In *Clinging to Mammy: The Faithful Slave in Twentieth-Century America*, Micki McElya explains the complicated history of the mammy figure, and her reflection of race relations in 20th Century America. She writes that perhaps the most famous example of a mammy figure is Aunt Jemima, a fictional ex-slave mammy used to sell pancakes. Once dubbed 'the most famous colored woman in the world', Aunt Jemima is one of 'the most enduring image of the faithful slave'.[371] The mammy figure first became popular in literature, cinema and advertising in the decades following the abolition of slavery with the 13th amendment to the constitution in 1865. Micki McElya argues that this character, and the domestic labour that she carried out, 'felt like a reconstitution of enslavement, while her employer's insistence on calling her 'mammy' was an expression of the white woman's fantasy of having a slave'.[372] McElya continues:

'the myth of the faithful slave lingers because so many white Americans have wished to live in a world in which African Americans are not angry over past and present injustices, a world in

[369] Barbara Neely, *Blanche on the Lam*, (Kansas: Brash Books, 1992) p. 16
[370] Neely, *Blanche on the Lam*, p. 213
[371] Micki McElya, *Clinging to Mammy: The Faithful Slave in Twentieth-Century America*, (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 2
[372] McElya, p. 209

which white people were and are not complicit, in which the injustices themselves - of slavery, Jim Crow and ongoing structural racism - seem not to exist at all. The mammy figure affirmed their wishes'.[373]

Blanche White is a unique example of the mammy character, as Neely presents her as only 'affirming the wishes' of her white employers because it benefits her. Neely subverts this expectation of the mammy and overtly discusses 'past and present injustices' through her protagonist, and Blanche plays the role of 'the faithful slave' only when she is not being observed. In *Mammy: A Century of Race, Gender and Southern Memory*, Kimberley Wallace-Sanders analyses two early examples of the mammy figure - Roxy in Mark Twain's Pudd'nhead Wilson (1893) and Mrs Harper in the short story 'Her Virginia Mammy' by Charles Chestnut (1899). Both texts were written in the decades following the 13th Amendment, and both texts 'highlight the experience of black women who *choose* to become mammies' and are not forced into this role through enslavement.[374] Wallace-Sanders chooses these two characters to discuss because, like Blanche, they offer a fuller picture of the inner life of the mammy. Both Roxy and Mrs Harper are important characters in their own stories, as opposed to being a background character in a story about a white family. Twain's Roxy character in particular 'is a complex character occupying a major role in the novel', unlike the traditional mammy figure - 'these women are not stereotypical characters, but multidimensional and interesting'.[375] Wallace-Sanders also reminds us that both texts also use their mammy characters to discuss political issues directly - 'slave motherhood, miscegenation and African American social progress'.[376]

[373] McElya, p. 3
[374] Kimberley Wallace-Sanders, *Mammy: A Century of Race, Gender and Southern Memory* (Michegan: 2010, University of Michegan Press), p.12
[375] Wallace-Sanders, p. 14
[376] Wallace-Sanders, p. 20

Roxy and Mrs Harper are early examples of the tradition of using the mammy figure as a tool to discuss African American issues following emancipation:

'While Aunt Jemima is trapped in the kitchen singing slave songs and serving pancakes, these characters recognize something about the fluidity of race and the ways that the mammy stereotype presents them with unparalleled opportunities… the mammy characters in Pudd'nhead Wilson and 'Her Virginia Mammy' reflect more complexity and greater depth than the Aunt Jemima of popular culture. Roxy and Mrs Harper are used as platforms for critical discussion about the most crucial turn-of-the-century issues'.[377]

A paradox of the mammy is a devotion for the white family that she worked for, but a neglect for her own family. The mammy 'loved her white family and would defend and protect them fiercely', making them a priority over any children of her own.[378] Yet, McElya remind us that 'the beloved mammy could slip into the negative role of matriarch simply by leaving the white home and family to take care of her own'.[379] Kimberley Wallace-Sanders describes the mammy as 'a mother who frequently displaces white mothers and has ambiguous relationships with her own children… her devotion for the children she cares for is best illustrated by her disregard for her own children'.[380] This prioritization of her white family is a crucial aspect of the 'faithful, obedient, domestic servant' role; the mammy is a woman with an 'implicit understanding and acceptance of her inferiority and her devotion to whites'.[381] Another paradox that the mammy experiences is a conflict between her submission to her white employers, and identity as an

[377] Wallace-Sanders, p.20
[378] McElya, p. 255
[379] McElya, p. 257
[380] Wallace-Sanders, p. 98
[381] McElya, p.212

African American. McElya names this as 'The Mammy Problem', describing this as a struggle with 'dominant white supremacist conceptions of black women's servitude, maternity and sexuality'.[382] In giving her readership access to Blanche's inner world, Neely tackles The Mammy Problem directly, and sets the scene for a discussion of the treatment of African American women, beneath a story about crime.

Blanche uses her invisibility to gain a position of power over the Carter family in *Blanche on the Lam*, and their preconceptions about her 'stupidity' allows her to carry out her investigations undetected. For example, in first encounter with her Grace, she is able to convince her that they have met before, 'forcing her mouth into a toothy grin' and 'blinking rapidly' with a voice 'two octaves higher than usual'.[383] This echoes Walker-Barnes' description: 'non-threatening, obedient and submissive', but this interaction takes on a new meaning when it is remembered that the reader is aware of Blanche's performance here. A key theme of *Blanche on the Lam* is an understanding that Blanche is merely pretending to be an exaggerated version of the 'mammy' character to appease the family that she works for. Blanche is introduced to Everett and Mumsfield by Grace, moments after Blanche telling Grace her name, as 'this is…er…this is…the woman the agency sent', offering an illustration of how invisible Blanche is to Grace.[384]

Neely's choice of name for her protagonist is significant within itself, 'Blanche' also means white and Neely reminds the reader that 'even among African Americans her blackness stands out'.[385] When she first introduces herself to Grace, Everett and Mumsfield, she is met with

[382] McElya, p. 207
[383] Neely, *Blanche on the Lam*, p. 14
[384] Neely, *Blanche on the Lam*, p. 29
[385] Hans Bertens and Theo D'Haen, *Contemporary American Crime Fiction*, (New York: Palgrave, 2001), p.192

'chuckles', 'a barely concealed grin on Everett's face' and a 'startled' expression on Grace's.[386] Beneath this persona, Blanche lives a rich, complex inner life that shared with the reader but largely hidden from her employers. An example of a subtle way that Neely reminds us of this double life that Blanche leads is in the names that she calls her employers. Blanche always called her employers by their first names in her mind because she finds that it helps her 'to remember that having the money to hire a domestic worker didn't make you any better than the worker, only richer'.[387] Yet, she always calls her employers ma'am and sir to their faces, 'no matter how much they insisted on some other title or name'.[388] This serves as a reminder of the juxtaposition between Blanche's real personality and the one that she has curated to appease her employers. Blanche finds small, harmless ways to remind herself, and the reader, of her power. Blanche routinely makes use of the out of bounds 'front' rooms of the homes that she works in, 'listening to expensive stereos…taking leisurely baths with the accompanying array of bath salts and inflatable bath pillows… using telephones or sitting quietly in living room'.[389] An illustration of the falseness of Blanche's character is a scene where she finds Grace crying. Neely explains that, if Grace had been a friend, Blanche would have immediately asked what was troubling her, but she'd long ago learned 'the painful price of confusing the skills she sold for money with the kind of caring that could be paid for only with reciprocity'.[390] Blanche watches her cry and reflects that 'Mammy-savers regularly peeped out at her from the faces of some white women for whom she worked'.[391] Blanche has learned not to offer any real advice, recognising that the relationship is inherently unequal, but offers 'a slow, sad smile, a matching shake of her head, and arms

[386] Neely, *Blanche on the Lam*, p. 30
[387] Neely, *Blanche on the Lam*, p. 27
[388] Neely, *Blanche on the Lam*, p. 27
[389] Harris, p. 144
[390] Neely, *Blanche on the Lam*, p. 38
[391] Neely, *Blanche on the Lam*, p. 39

folded tightly across her chest' whenever her white employers pour their feelings out to her.[392] There are aspects of performance and defensiveness in this response that reveal Blanche's knowledge of the power relations at play.

Outside of her job, Blanche is a keenly intelligent and resourceful detective; she 'got a lot of secret pleasure from fooling people who assumed they were smarter than she was by virtue of the way she looked and made her living'.[393] Blanche is 'smart and resourceful, and she's a servant by profession, which makes it possible for her presence to be overlooked at critical moments'.[394] In the duality of Blanche's life here, Neely comments on the prejudices that oppress and limit Blanche; she takes her job as a domestic worker because it is one of the few available to her but she has the resources to be a professional detective. Mildred Mickle reminds us that in Neely's novels, Blanche is a detective figure and 'an embodiment and critique of negative stereotypes of blacks'.[395] In Blanche White, Neely aims to offer a 'portrait of modern, urban African American experiences' and discuss issues that affected her community, through the lens of a domestic worker, a feature of crime fiction novels that was traditionally kept in the background.[396]

Neely does not shy away from political discussion within her Blanche White series - 'many crime novels propel the reader into an encounter with the sorts of debates and issues that elsewhere occupy op-ed pages and scholarly journals'.[397] Blanche White is a protagonist that not only fully understands her double consciousness as an African American woman and finds a way

[392] Neely, *Blanche on the Lam*, p. 40
[393] Neely, *Blanche on the Lam*, p. 16
[394] Wesson, p. 22
[395] Mildred Mickle, 'A Cleansing Construction: Blanche White as Domestic Heroine in Barbara Neely's "Blanche on the Lam"', *Obsidian*, (8:1), 2007, 73-91 (p. 76)
[396] Wesson, p. 22
[397] Wesson p. 22

of using it to her advantage. Neely re-imagines Blanche's invisibility as a secret weapon, and she reminds us that 'a family couldn't have domestic help and secrets'.[398] In the novel's conclusion, when Blanche reveals that she has been watching her employer, Grace, and is aware of the string of murders that she has committed. Blanche is 'unimpressed by the tears and Graces Mammy-save-me eyes', remarking that it 'never ceased to be amazed at how many white people longed for Aunt Jemima'.[399] Here, Grace's naivety around Blanche is revealed, and the reader sees the extent to which Grace ignores Blanche as she never thinks to be suspicious of the 'mammy'. Neely's detective is a complex and fully rounded character, Wesson, writing more generally about black domestic detectives like Blanche, reminds us that 'these characters are not mere mouthpieces, for they have eccentricities, relationships, complicated lives'.[400]

The 'mammy' is also not expected to discuss her own sexuality and relationships and is limited to the role that she plays in the white family as a domestic worker. The 'mammy' is often presented as largely asexual, and immune to the sexualisation that is typical of the crime fiction genre, as a result of her maternal role. Blanche White is a character with a complicated personal life; throughout the series Blanche is seen to have friendships, relationships with men, responsibility for her sister's children and political opinions of her own. This is a subversion of the 'mammy' figure and illustrates to the reader that Blanche is character that only chooses to play the role of the 'mammy' when it benefits her. The relationship between the 'mammy' figure and sexualisation is also a complex one in Neely's novels, since Blanche discusses her sexuality throughout the series, but never in front of white people. Kate Wilhelm writes that an important

[398] Neely, *Blanche on the Lam*, p. 95
[399] Neely, Blanche on the Lam, p. 39
[400] Mimi Wesson, 'Review: When the Criminal Is Political', The Women's Review of Books, 12:4 (1995) pp. 22-23 (p. 22)

aspect of the female detective is her sexualisation, claiming that they figure as either 'asexual amateurs' or 'romance-seekers who stumbled briefly into contact with crime on their way to a conventional happy ending'.[401] Blanche is a unique case because she occupies both of these definitions, proving that although asexuality is an important aspect of the 'pleasant stupidity' that she performs to appease her employers, she is a rounded character with her own sexuality in private. Blanche is introduced to the readership as a woman with 'big hips' and 'breasts and forearms to match'.[402] She identifies as a 'night girl', meaning that she feels free to walk the streets at night, safe from the dangers of men because she feels that they will not sexualise her, a 'mammy'.[403]

Behind her 'mammy' façade, Blanche has an untraditional and complicated family life outside of her employment as a domestic worker. Neely describes a conflict between Blanche not wanting children of her own but being thrown into the role of mother after her sister dies and leaves her children, Tafia and Malik, in her care. Blanche's attitude towards children is another illustration of the difference between Blanche's true personality and her 'mammy' persona. Neely describes being 'reluctant to take on the role of parent' and refers to Taifa and Malik as 'the children' throughout the series.[404] 'The' is a subtle, yet powerful reminder that Blanche sees Taifa and Malik as her sister's children, not her own. Blanche cares for the children only because 'she'd promised her sister she would do so' and following her death it had 'taken a year as an adult runaway in California before she could finally face the task'.[405] Similarly, Blanche does not want to be married, but craves a relationship with Leo. Blanche actively rejects marriage, and her

[401] Wesson, p. 22
[402] Neely, *Blanche on the Lam*, p.7
[403] Neely, *Blanche on the Lam*, p. 60
[404] Neely, *Blanche on the Lam*, p. 9
[405] Neely, *Blanche on the Lam*, p. 9

single status is another aspect of the mammy figure – when she had been proposed to in the past she had been 'overcome by the same feeling she'd first experienced at the age of twelve while stuck in a small elevator for three hours'.[406] Blanche's lack of a husband or children adds another degree of 'outsiderhood' to her character. *Blanche on the Lam* extends this feeling of 'outsiderhood' of the female detective, because Blanche is also an African American woman. She is also living in a small town, in the south of America, is caring for her sister's children alone and is a domestic worker – aspects of her characterisation that extend her oppression.

The mammy has always been a political figure in literature, used as a catalyst by writers such as Neely to spark a discussion about treatment of African American women. In a 1993 interview with Neely in *Harvard Review*, Rosemary Herbert describes Blanche on the Lam as 'succeeding not only as a mystery story by as a political statement'.[407] Herbert argues that Neely's story is intended to be both 'entertaining' and 'enlightening' at the same time, designed to offer an insight into Blanche's inner world:

> 'since African-American protagonists remains rare in detective fiction, Barbara Neely's work would be remarkable merely for the fact that it features the black domestic worker, ironically named Blanche White, as sleuth. But Neely has gone beyond simply choosing an African American to act as heroine; she has endowed her character with a frank voice that speaks for an entire class of workers and individuals who are otherwise invisible in our society'[408]

[406] Barbara Neely, *Blanche Among the Talented Tenth*, (Kansas, Brash Books, 1994), p. 12
[407] Rosemary Herbert, 'An Interview With Barbara Neely', *Harvard Review*, 5 (1993), pp. 107-116, p. 110
[408] Herbert, p. 107

Blanche is certainly far more than just the heroine of this story; Neely herself explains this best; she argues that 'the best way to talk about serious issues is to talk about them in a nonserious way, because people are not threatened by them… then it's a lot easier for the reader to get the point'.[409] Like Ann Petry, Neely worked as an activist for the African American community; she created a housing program for female felons in Pittsburgh called 'Shady Side', was a director of a YMCA branch, the executive director of Women for Economic Justice, and a cofounder of Women of Color for Reproductive Freedom. Like Petry, Neely also found her voice in writing fiction, another aspect of her activism work. Neely published a short story, 'Passing the Word', in *Essence* magazine, wrote for *Southern Exposure*, and produced shows for *African News Service*. Neely recalls one reader telling her "I would never have read anything on race and class, but I got the message through your mystery'.[410] Neely argues that disguising her political commentary as 'light entertainment' a writer 'can slip in a lot of very, very serious material and have it accepted in a way that you couldn't if you did a nonfiction treatment'.[411] Context of Neely's history as an activist for the African American community is crucial to understanding Blanche's role as a mouthpiece for Neely and her political commentary throughout her novels.

In this interview, Neely goes on to argue that, in some ways, Blanche takes on an autobiographical role, a reflection of Neely herself. Neely describes the feeling of being 'unknown' and ignored by her white peers: 'white women pass me every day who know me and don't see me, because they generally don't see black people. It happens all the time'.[412] However,

[409] Herbert, p. 107
[410] Herbert, p. 113
[411] Herbert, p. 113
[412] Herbert, p. 111

like Blanche, Neely describes the feeling of empowerment that comes with her invisibility: 'I can now go [to] certain kinds of settings that I want to be able to describe with some understanding and be unobserved. So yesterday, for instance, I went to the Park Plaza Hotel and stood about, and was totally ignored'.[413] In *Blanche on the Lam*, Blanche quips that one cannot have servants and secrets, a truth that Neely learned in her own life. Both of her grandmothers worked as domestic workers, and Neely cites stories that they would tell her about her work as inspiration for the character of Blanche. Neely also spoke to a friend that works as a domestic worker whilst writing the novel, who told her 'don't forget the wastebaskets. Huge amounts of information are in those baskets'.[414] This inspiration carries over into Blanche's role as a detective, using her invisibility as a tool to uncover crimes and injustices that occur around her.

The Use of Gossip as an Investigative Tool

A defining aspect of Blanche's role as a domestic detective is her ability to carry out her investigations privately, secretly, and outside of the confines of the justice system. She relies on gossip, covert observation, and charisma to gain clues that help her to piece together a story. Yet, unlike the classical, individualistic hardboiled detective, that works alone and without outside interference, Blanche is a part of a network of other domestic workers that share information together. This is the 'old girl network', and her knowledge of the inner lives of her employers gives her a position of power over them.[415] Blanche is part of a 'black grapevine of drivers, part-time help, gardeners and cooks' that provides one another with their observations, information

[413] Herbert, p. 109
[414] Herbert, p. 110
[415] Leslie Lockhart, 'Review: Blanche on the Lam by Blanche White', The Black Scholar 23:2 (1993) p. 56

on family histories and clues that aid her investigations.[416] Blanche is set apart from the classical hardboiled detective in her use of the 'old girl network' as an investigative tool. Blanche's networking skills make her a successful detective, as she utilizes this network of people to her advantage. There is sense of comradery to this exchange of information, this is a 'legion of women and men, who are commonly ignored or disregarded… the silent witnesses and gatherers of information' with a desire to 'help set things straight' and expose the crimes and indiscretions of the privileged and ignorant people that they work for.[417] For example, in *Blanche on the Lam* she uses Grace is unaware of Blanche's suspicions of her, which gives Blanche an investigative advantage as she interrogates people around her. It is Nate, the family's gardener, that brings up the topic of Aunt Emmeline's new will and Blanche innocently asks 'what do you make of all that?', subtly encouraging him to give up information.[418] Nate is quick to criticise Everett in this scene: 'I know it's got to be him that's behind this mess… hardest work the man does is brushin' back his hair… unless you call gamblin' and runnin' after women 'work'.[419] Here, in this short interaction, Blanche is gathering clues – she learns that Nate, who has worked closely with the family since he was 'twelve years old' dislikes Everett and paints him out to be reckless with money and overly concerned with appearances.[420] These are subtle clues that allows Blanche, and the reader, to piece together a profile of a criminal later, when Nate is murdered. Gossiping is often seen as trivial, but this tool is what allows Blanche to investigate and identify criminals. Here the pillars of the crime fiction genre – a detective, an investigation, a grand reveal - are upheld; Blanche ultimately 'unravels the knot of deceit and exposes the guilty'.[421]

[416] Lockhart, p. 56
[417] Lockhart, p. 56
[418] Neely, *Blanche on the Lam*, p. 56
[419] Neely, *Blanche on the Lam*, p. 57
[420] Neely, *Blanche on the Lam*, p. 57
[421] Lockhart, p. 56

Nate shares Blanche's understanding the stereotypes that his white employers project onto him; he is quiet and submissive in the presence of Everett, 'concentrating on the baseball cap in his hands' whilst he is spoken to. Yet, once Everett leaves the room, he and Blanche are free to drop their acts. This usage of the 'old girl network' is repeated in *Blanche Among the Talented Tents*, where gossiping and charming suspects forms a large part of her investigative technique. In *Blanche on the Lam*, Barbara Neely opens her novel by introducing her protagonist, Blanche White; she is standing in a courtroom being threatened with the possibility of going to jail for a bad-check charge. The judge 'hardly bothered to look at her' but when he did, he gave her 'a look that made her raise her handbag to her chest like a shield'.[422] Her case is closed before she can even speak to defend herself and she is removed from the courtroom by a matron with skin 'as pale as plaster against the deep blackness of Blanche's'.[423] As the courthouse staff are distracted by a commotion, Blanche slips out of the back door and escapes: 'she knew better than to run… a running black person was still a target of suspicion in this town'.[424] In this scene, Neely reveals several things about the character of Blanche Lam : she is a victim of unfair discrimination as an African American woman, she is painfully aware of this, and she is willing to use her resourcefulness to succeed.

As well as using the people around her to gather clues, there is also an individualistic element to Blanche's investigations; she silently and covertly observes those around her and their habit of overlooking Blanche gives her a degree of freedom to investigate unnoticed. An example of this

[422] Neely, *Blanche on the Lam*, p. 1
[423] Neely, *Blanche on the Lam*, p. 2
[424] Neely, *Blanche on the Lam*, p. 6

in *Blanche on the Lam* is Blanche using the time that she is in Emmeline's bedroom to deliver her dinner to look for clues and analyse what she sees; she sees 'a water glass with a small amount of clear liquid in it' and 'the smell of stale booze', subtle hints towards Aunt Emmeline's alcoholism and clues that aid her in her 'unravelling' of this mystery'.[425] Blanche White fulfils many tropes of the black domestic detective, thrown into a crime scene unexpectedly and using her invisibility as a shield to carry out a private investigation undetected. Grace, the criminal in question in *Blanche on the Lam*, was unaware that she was even being investigated until it was too late. The 'mammy' persona that Blanche has mastered serves as a mask for her to hide behind as a detective. Blanche 'observes events carefully, speaks with quick wit and acts with the double face of a woman who has mastered being Black and working among white folks'.[426] Blanche is a 'black woman up the street' and a 'take charge kind of woman'; she offers Neely's readership a 'behind the scenes' glimpse into the life of a domestic worker, and her hidden investigative talents, traditionally a flat character in stories about white families.[427] Blanche uses both her own charisma, private observations and her network of other domestic workers to create a picture of the crime in question. Blanche consistently uses her invisibility to her advantage, and anonymity quickly becomes an important aspect of her investigative style. She has a habit of fleeing the scene once the criminal is revealed.

In the epilogue to *Blanche on the Lam*, Blanche reflects on her investigation and plans to flee to Boston 'in a state of plans-and-whereabouts-unknown' and deciding that 'it was best' for her not to tell the police 'the whole truth'.[428] Here, Blanche controls who has access to the information

[425] Neely, *Blanche on the Lam*, p. 41
[426] Lockhart, p. 56
[427] Lockhart, p. 56
[428] Neely, *Blanche on the Lam*, p. 213

that she hoards. It is also significant that Blanche 'didn't mind that he'd [Everett] gotten away' because 'he hadn't hurt anyone she cared about'.[429] Rather than caring about receiving credit for uncovering Grace's crimes, her 'major goal had been to make sure that everyone around knew just how crazy Grace was' and 'ensuring that she stayed locked up'.[430] It is significant that Blanche had 'hardly gotten out the door before she was asking around for a reporter a person could halfway trust' and was more concerned with the reporter assuring her 'that her name would not be mentioned'.[431] Here, Blanche is set apart from other detective figures such as Walter Mosley's Easy Rawlins, who carries out his investigation on behalf of the LAPD, working within the confines of a legal system and with the aim of bringing criminals appropriately to justice. Blanche assaults Grace, hitting her with a board, breaking her nose and leaving her unconscious. She stands over Grace and decides to hold onto the memory as 'something to remember Nate by'.[432] Blanche 'smiled at the memory of Grace lying unconscious at her feet' and she takes pride in realizing that 'she would also always be a woman who'd fought for her life and won', a reminder that the investigation throughout this novel is merely a backdrop for a larger discussion about Blanche's 'fight for her life' on a metaphorical level.[433]

Blanche is presented as a trickster within this novel, disguising herself among the white families that she works for and lives among. In *Blanche Passes Go*, the final instalment of the series, Blanche comes to an important realization as she returns home to Farleigh, North Carolina. She admits to her good friend Ardell that she is a detective – a label that she has not applied to herself until this point. Blanche finally admits that she has a talent for investigation, and becomes a

[429] Neely, *Blanche on the Lam*, p. 213
[430] Neely, *Blanche on the Lam*, p. 213
[431] Neely, *Blanche on the Lam*, p. 213
[432] Neely, *Blanche on the Lam*, p. 200
[433] Neely, *Blanche on the Lam*, p. 213

formal, professional detective as she agrees to be hired by a client in Farleigh. It is symbolically noteworthy that she would come to this realization in the place where the series began, and there is a sense of a cycle being completed here. Blanche's invisibility allows her to slip away in the chaos undetected, in the knowledge that she will not be tracked down. Blanche understands that this movement from the scene is necessary from the outset. She reminisces about this cycle of moving and fleeing and 'felt something akin to shame'; 'first some pervert ran her out of New York, then the law ran her into this mess, and now she was running away from a crazy-assed white woman'.[434]

Another advantage to Blanche's invisibility is her ability to carry out her investigation covertly, without Grace even being aware that she was being watched until the final moment. It is striking that Blanche is able to get a full confession out of Grace, as she trusts that Blanche will not report these crimes, or at least if she did then she would not be believed. Nancy Tolson reminds us that Blanche is 'quick-witted and a smooth talker' - these are 'survival skills' that she has learned that aid her in her investigation and allow her to outwit criminals such as Grace.[435] Grace 'glowed with pride' as she details her crime: 'I had my own plan, and it worked beautifully!'.[436] Grace patronises Blanche in a 'one, two, three, that's-how-you-make-a-good-apple-pie voice', and Blanche listens to her retell the story that she already knows.[437] As Blanche questions her, Grace quips: 'you are a nosy one, aren't you… not that it's going to do you any good'.[438] It is

[434] Neely, *Blanche on the Lam*, p. 197
[435] Nancy D. Tolson, 'The Butler Didn't Do It so Now They're Blaming the Maid: Defining a Black Feminist Trickster through the Novels of Barbara Neely', *Whose Body: Recognizing Feminist Mystery and Detective Fiction,* 18:3 (2001), pp. 72-85 (p.75)
[436] Neely, *Blanche on the Lam*, p. 191
[437] Neely, *Blanche on the Lam*, p. 191
[438] Neely, *Blanche on the Lam*, p. 194

Blanche's 'nosy' nature that gives her leverage over Grace, a display of her cleverly concealed intelligence, and her understanding of her own double consciousness.

Blanche is shocked at how easily this confession comes, and finds it difficult to believe that 'she was actually standing here listening to the details of murders told to her by the person who'd committed them' in a manner that 'might have been describing how she'd contrived a particularly elegant flower arrangement'.[439] Neely has Grace explain the details of Aunt Emeline's death, perhaps more for the reader's benefit than Blanche's: 'I dissolved the pills in her soup and Everett carried her to the basement'.[440] When Blanche finally confesses that she knows about Grace's murders, Grace is surprised and impressed. This scene in the kitchen, where Grace confesses to her murders, also fulfils one of the most important tropes of detective fiction – the reveal. This is Neely's 'sense of an ending' that Frank Kermode argues is a compulsory aspect of the crime novel; the details of the story are tied up in the final pages, more for the benefit of the reader than the detective that already knows what they are being told. An incredible aspect of Blanche's investigation is her ability to remain undetected throughout her time investigating Grace. Blanche is an 'investigator criminologist who has no degree'; she 'cooks to make a living while she solves the mysteries in her world'.[441] Blanche also talks privately with Archibald and presents the completed findings of her investigation into Grace. She confronts him: 'Grace killed Nate and the sheriff…now, you look here, you…you let an imposter sign Emmeline's will, and you'd better check the cellar in the house in town before you call anybody'.[442] Stunned, Archibald stares at Blanche not daring to interrupt her as she 'told him all

[439] Neely, *Blanche on the Lam*, p. 193
[440] Neely, *Blanche on the Lam*, p. 191
[441] Tolson, 'The Butler Didn't Do It so Now They're Blaming the Maid: Defining a Black Feminist Trickster through the Novels of Barbara Neely', p. 73
[442] Neely, *Blanche on the Lam*, p. 203

that she knew and guessed'; Archibald 'looked as though he suspected her of having supernatural powers' and Blanche explains 'it's a small county… there ain't a lot of secrets'.[443] It is noteworthy that Archibald's initial reaction is to use his money to erase this problem. He 'described how the family could and should cover up any and all crimes' and offered Blanche a job as housekeeper and companion to Mumsfield at a salary that 'made her eyes sparkle'.[444] Seeing an opportunity to grab some much needed money, Blanche tells Archibald that her children 'need health insurance and good schooling', she demands 'a ten-year contract. In writing. And a pension plan'.[445] Archibald 'merely nodded' in response to her request.[446] Of course, the reader is aware that Blanche will not take this job, and will flee and repeat the cycle that was illustrated in the opening of the novel. Here, the tone for the series is introduced, and it becomes clear that Blanche intends to repeat this cycle of fleeing, solving crimes, and fleeing again throughout the series.

Throughout *Blanche on the Lam*, Grace leaves Blanche largely unaddressed, but the revelation that Blanche is aware of Grace's criminal activity marks a turning point in their relationship. Once Grace's crimes are exposed, her guard is removed and her true opinions boil to the surface. She calls Blanche 'whore', 'nigger bitch' and 'black slut', names that Blanche 'had long ago learned had nothing to do with her and everything to do with the person from whose mouth they came'.[447] It is significant that Neely chooses to remind her readership that, just as Blanche performed for Grace, Grace also concealed the extent of her true, racist feelings towards Blanche. Grace snaps 'they say you people always know one of your own, no matter how light-

[443] Neely, *Blanche on the Lam*, p. 209
[444] Neely, *Blanche on the Lam*, p. 211
[445] Neely, *Blanche on the Lam*, p. 211
[446] Neely, *Blanche on the Lam*, p. 211
[447] Neely, *Blanche on the Lam*, p. 124

skinned'.[448] The 'idea that all black people recognized each other, no matter how diluted their African blood, appealed to Blanche, but she was proof it wasn't so'.[449] After all, Grace was easily convinced that Blanche had worked for them and lived in their home when they first met, unable to tell one African American woman from another.

It is also significant that one of the weapons that Grace uses to carry out her murder is her sexuality. Before murdering the Sheriff with a wrench, she hides in the back of the Sheriff's car and convinces him to drive to a remote location with the promise of sex. She described how he 'ran right off the road' when she put her 'brassiere on his shoulder'.[450] She whispered 'in a soft voice full of the genteel Georgia accent': 'I want to settle our problem in a way I hope you can't refuse, Sheriff'.[451] Blanche imagines the Sheriff 'congratulating himself on his good fortune as his brain swelled to full attention in his clammy shorts'.[452] Here, sexuality is used as a weapon just as much as the wrench itself, with Grace holding a position of power over the Sheriff as she lures him to his death.

In the novel's climax, tropes of the pulp fiction genre sensationalise this story; the violent altercation between Blanche and Grace clears up any confusion in the reader's mind of who is the 'villain' character. The violence here is expected of a crime fiction novel and echoes the features of popular pulp fiction novels of the earlier 20th century. As Grace begins to mention Nate's death, Blanche loses her typical composure and moved towards Grace 'with a swift

[448] Neely, *Blanche on the Lam*, p. 124
[449] Neely, *Blanche on the Lam*, p. 124
[450] Neely, *Blanche on the Lam*, p. 192
[451] Neely, *Blanche on the Lam*, p. 192
[452] Neely, *Blanche on the Lam*, p. 193

determination that momentarily paralyzed' her.[453] Blanche punched her with a force that 'was so satisfying it made her "Aah" with pleasure'; she only allowed herself 'a moment in which to savor it'.[454] This is a rare example of Blanche abandoning the quiet, submissive and obedient 'mammy' role that she plays around Grace, and it is noteworthy that this break in character is caused by the knowledge that another African American in her 'old girls network' has been murdered. There is a depth to this anger that is unlocked in Blanche here, as she understands that Grace learning of Blanche's knowledge of her murders will mean she must run away. Knowing this, Blanche is free to drop the 'mammy' act in front of Grace for the first time in their relationship. The image of blood dripping down Grace's 'cream-colored silk blouse', as she 'raised the knife and roared like a wild and angry beast' is symbolic and typical of the pulp fiction novels that were popular as Neely was writing.[455] Even the house itself becomes a character within this scene, and an image of violence is evoked as Blanche flees and the house 'slammed' all its doors in her face'; it told her 'you can't hide in here… Grace had known the house since she was a child… all its secret spaces were open to her'.[456] Grace's privilege and power over Blanche is illustrated here, and Neely reminds the reader of the racial power relations that still define the relationship between Grace and Blanche, despite Blanche's momentary power over her as she reveals her findings of her investigation. This altercation ends with Blanche knocking Grace unconscious with a board, and a powerful moment in the novel's conclusion is when Blanche stands over Grace's body and 'gingerly felt for a pulse in the woman's throat'.[457]

[453] Neely, *Blanche on the Lam*, p. 195
[454] Neely, *Blanche on the Lam*, p. 195
[455] Neely, *Blanche on the Lam*, p. 196
[456] Neely, *Blanche on the Lam*, p. 196
[457] Neely, *Blanche on the Lam*, p. 200

Black Authenticity and Outsiderhood

Throughout the series Neely uses Blanche to discuss 'passing' among African Americans that she encounters. Blanche resents women that have fairer skin than her, and notes how they have a certain degree of privilege within their community. Outsiderhood is an important element of the character of Blanche; not only is the discrimination that she experiences as an African American an important aspect of Neely's narration but Blanche is also an outsider within the African American community. This outsiderhood is a trope of the hardboiled detective, and here Blanche fulfils this expectation of a working class hardboiled detective figure. This discussion of 'passing' and the spectrum of discrimination within the African American community allows Neely to raise questions about being 'authentically' African American. Racial 'passing' is an expression used to describe a person that is perceived as a member of another racial group, with the intention of escaping the prejudice and discrimination that they experience. This theme is especially important in the second novel of the series, *Blanche Among the Talented Tenth*. 'Talented Tenth' is a reference to W.E.B. DuBois' 1903 essay *The Talented Tenth*, where he argues that 'one in ten Black men… have cultivated the ability to become leaders of the Black community by acquiring a college education, writing books, and becoming directly involved in social change'. DuBois writes that these men 'should sacrifice their personal interests and use their education to lead and better the Black community'.[458] *Blanche Among the Talented Tenth* introduces the theme of double consciousness before the reader opens the book, a quote from this essay is included by Neely in the foreword of the novel: 'The Talented Tenth of the Negro race

[458] Juan Battle and Earl Wright, 'W.E.B. DuBois' Talented Tenth', *Journal of Black Studies*, 32:6 (2002) pp. 654-672 (p. 654)

must be made leaders of thought and missionaries of culture among their people…The Negro race, like all other races, is going to be saved by its exceptional men'.[459]

Of course, as well as this social commentary, there is an investigation into a crime – a woman, Faith Brown, is murdered. Blanche quickly discovers that Faith has collected compromising history about others at Amber Cove - in a sense, Blanche is doing the same thing that Faith Brown had been doing: digging up an ugly and inaccurate version of the past. Although Blanche solves the mystery that the novel is centred around, there are a host of unanswered questions as the novel concludes. Blanche wonders 'why she is treating Tina poorly once the dark-skinned young woman has declared her allegiance to her light-skinned… how she can get the white domestic worker who cleans her cottage to trust her… how a handsome, light-skinned African-American man could be attracted to her, a dark-skinned and not-thin woman'.[460]

Neely fails to provide answers to these mysteries, and the conclusion to her story feels incomplete, a subversion of the crime fiction genre. In this novel Blanche vacations at Amber Cove, a 'long-standing upper-class African- American resort community in New England' and she quickly observes that she is the only guest 'with any true colour'.[461] At Amber Cove, Blanche encounters mostly light-skinned middle and upper class African American characters. Mattie, a famous black feminist historian, fails to impress Blanche because she is married to a white man. Another woman, Tina, wins Blanche's respect as she recalls memories of growing up in the projects of North Philadelphia, but loses this respect when Blanche learns that she studied at Brown University and is engaged to a light-skinned man. When Tina announces her

[459] Neely, *Blanche Among the Talented Tenth*, foreword
[460] English, p. 790
[461] Neely, *Blanche Among the Talented Tenth*, p.40

engagement, all Blanche feels is 'disappointment' and feels that a 'distance stretched between them'.[462] Blanche observes how these people exist in the space between black and white, feeling a connection to neither community.

In the novel's conclusion, Blanche decides that there are 'things besides colour that made a person black' and these things were simply 'missing' from the guests that she shares the resort with.[463] Blanche writes these new acquaintances off as 'as hincty a bunch of Talented Tenths as you'd ever want to see', seeing herself as separate from the other guests.[464] In one scene, Blanche watches the guests dance and reflects how they exist in an eerie space between African American and white: 'there was nothing in the way these people moved on the dance floor that said their people invented rhythm… there was no swing in their walk, none of the shoulder, hip, or hand language that spoke volumes among black people she knew'.[465] Blanche describes 'having your juices watered down' as a symptom of living and working outside the black community, and feeling a lack of identity as a result.[466] Even the food served to these people at Amber Cove is gentrified, appearing almost ashamed to be linked with African American culture: 'while the food here was excellent, she hadn't seen any collards, cornbread, sweet potatoes, fried chicken, grits or any other staples of the black diet as she knew it'.[467] Talking to Stu, another guest at Amber Cove, Neely reflects on the cruel oppression that African American women experience through Blanche: "if I had a nickel for every time I've been called ink spot, coal bin or little black Sambo'.[468] Blanche made a conscious decision to 'stick with domestic work instead of

[462] Neely, *Blanche Among the Talented Tenth*, p. 229
[463] Neely, *Blanche Among the Talented Tenth*, p. 58
[464] Neely, *Blanche Among the Talented Tenth*, p. 65
[465] Neely, *Blanche Among the Talented Tenth*, p. 58
[466] Neely, *Blanche Among the Talented Tenth*, p. 58
[467] Neely, *Blanche Among the Talented Tenth*, p. 58
[468] Neely, *Blanche Among the Talented Tenth*, p. 179

taking up nursing… or clerical work, or some other career' that she is well aware is available to African American women.[469]

Before Blanche sets off for her holiday in Amber Cove, Neely introduces the discussion of image and race within this novel. Blanche packs her suitcase and reflects that 'clothes would be important at Amber Cove… black people, even well-off black people, seemed to believe in looking good'.[470] When working for a black psychologist, Blanche asked her about ' black people's attachment to clothes', and she had told Blanche that this was partly due to African peoples' belief in body adornment in a spiritual way, and partly because, consciously or unconsciously, black people in America hoped clothes would make them acceptable to people who hated them no matter what they wore.[471] Blanche sarcastically quips: 'I guess there won't be a lot of guests sittin' around talkin' about how beautiful black is' and recalls 'memories of past rejections and jeers because of her blackness'.[472] Neely writes that 'even now in 1994', social status was 'not only wealth or social position, but also skin color'.[473] Neely makes a subtle point about the themes of the story that she is about to tell through Blanche's reading material on the train - 'the latest copy of *The Amsterdam News* and Octavia Butler's *Dawn*'.[474] *The Amsterdam News* was known for social protest and coverage of stories about discrimination against African Americans.

The history of Amber Cove is also a symbolic choice for Neely, and is a carefully chosen setting for this story. Blanche 'could smell the money just looking at this picture' of Amber Cove and

[469] Neely, *Blanche Among the Talented Tenth*, p. 180
[470] Neely, *Blanche Among the Talented Tenth*, p. 1
[471] Neely, *Blanche Among the Talented Tenth*, p. 2
[472] Neely, *Blanche Among the Talented Tenth*, p. 5
[473] Neely, *Blanche Among the Talented Tenth*, p. 6
[474] Neely, *Blanche Among the Talented Tenth*, p. 10

remarks that 'all the people in it could be models for the after pictures in a skin-lightener ad'.[475] She quips that 'anytime you get this many light-skinned black people together at least half of them are going to be folks who act light-skinned…It wasn't natural for a picture of black people in a public place to all be the same complexion, unless somebody wanted it that way'.[476] The area that Amber Cove is built in also has a deep connection with the slave trade: 'Many runaway African slaves passed through Maine on their way to freedom in Nova Scotia. When slavery officially ended, some of them, and/or their children, migrated down into Maine'.[477]

It is also significant that Amber Cove's construction was funded by companies that created products to help African Americans look more white: 'Amber Cove was built in 1898 by Josiah Coghill, a black tycoon who made his fortune on Coghill's Skin Lightening Creme, Coghill's Silky Straight, a lye-based hair straightener for black men, and related products'.[478] Passing for white, or a rejection of blackness, forms a central aspect of this story. Blanche confesses that 'for just once in my life, I'd like to get through a whole week without having to deal with some fool, white or black, who's got an attitude about the way I look'.[479] It is significant that Neely has a habit of introducing her characters with a description of their skin colour. Amber Cove's manager, Arthur Hill, is first described as 'light-skinned' with a 'puffy bottom lip' and 'large dark eyes' that 'widened' when he saw Blanche walk in.[480] He stared at her 'unprocessed hair' – she describes sensing that 'how well she'd whiteified her hair' was a 'major issue' for him.[481] Neely poses a question here, more to the reader than to Blanche: 'in the case of someone as black

[475] Neely, *Blanche Among the Talented Tenth*, p. 3
[476] Neely, *Blanche Among the Talented Tenth*, p. 3
[477] Neely, *Blanche Among the Talented Tenth*, p. 5
[478] Neely, *Blanche Among the Talented Tenth*, p. 5
[479] Neely, *Blanche Among the Talented Tenth*, p. 8
[480] Neely, *Blanche Among the Talented Tenth*, p. 15
[481] Neely, *Blanche Among the Talented Tenth*, p. 16

as her, were her clothes and the condition of her hair even more important to him?'.[482] He 'sucked on his bottom lip and squinted at her in a way that said she was definitely a problem'.[483] Blanche 'hadn't straightened her hair since she was nineteen and had yet to agree to allow Taifa to straighten hers'.[484] The first guest that Blanche meets in Amber Cove is carrying a 'box of Rebirth Conditioner and Relaxer, the Straight and Swingy Permanent Renewal Kit, and the large can of EverHold hair spray' and she was 'surprised such black products were available in this very white part of the world'.[485] The woman had 'sandy-blond hair and old ivory skin' and Blanche had thought the woman was white before 'a closer look revealed that some of that lack of color was due to skillfully applied makeup that made her face a shade or two lighter than her arms'.[486] The woman 'had the kind of wavy and shoulder length, kink-free hair many little black girls would kill their Barbie dolls for, even today'.[487] This encounter foreshadows the fixation on whiteness among the African American residents of Amber Cove, and also the theme of concealing and disguise. Blanche scoffs: 'everybody in the country got color on the brain—white folks trying to brown themselves up and looking down on everything that ain't white at the same time; black folks puttin' each other down for being too black; brown folks trying to make sure nobody mistakes them for black; yellow folks trying to convince themselves they're white'.[488] Blanche feels that skin colour has very little to do with her race, and how these lightening products could not remove her 'blackness': 'she couldn't make the leap to wanting to step out of the talk, walk, music, food, and feeling of being black that the white world often imitated but never really understood… she realized how small a part her complexion played in what it meant

[482] Neely, *Blanche Among the Talented Tenth*, p. 16
[483] Neely, *Blanche Among the Talented Tenth*, p. 16
[484] Neely, *Blanche Among the Talented Tenth*, p. 8
[485] Neely, *Blanche Among the Talented Tenth*, p. 19
[486] Neely, *Blanche Among the Talented Tenth*, p. 19
[487] Neely, *Blanche Among the Talented Tenth*, p. 19
[488] Neely, *Blanche Among the Talented Tenth*, p. 9

to her to be black'.[489] Blanche washes her hair with 'African Formula Genuine Black Shampoo and Conditioner' and takes pride in 'oiling, then corn-rowing her damp hair, enjoying its soft, woolly texture'.[490] Reflecting on Veronica Tatterson and her hair products, Blanche 'marveled that something that felt so good could be such a matter of shame and distress to so many people… most of the black women she knew, especially the younger ones, could hardly stand the idea of their hair in its natural state'.[491] Blanche 'knew people who would think she'd lost her mind if they saw her out, "playing around with them roots and such," as her mother had said'.[492]

Another, more recent example, of an African American housekeeper character is Caren Grey, the protagonist of Attica Locke's 2012 novel, *The Cutting Season.* This novel is set on a Louisiana plantation house, Belle Vie, where Caren works and reflects on the time that her ancestors lived there as slaves. Much like Blanche, Caren is thrown into the role of detective, as she contemplates the legacy of slavery and illegal immigration. The buildings that used to serve as slave cabins are now the setting for a play about slavery, put on for tourists. Caren describes the air as 'so still it cut, the feeling that you could never get enough breath, no matter how hard you tried'.[493] Like Petry's Harlem, and Neely's Amber Cove, the setting for this novel is a character within its own right. The plantation is introduced as 'not to be trusted... beneath its loamy topsoil, the manicured grounds and gardens, two centuries of breathtaking wealth and spectacle, lay a land both black and bitter, soft to the touch, but pressing in its power'.[494] Like Blanche, Caren is thrown into the role of detective when a migrant worker from a neighboring farm is found murdered. In a review of the novel in The Guardian, Alison Flood reminds us that it is

[489] Neely, *Blanche Among the Talented Tenth*, p. 20
[490] Neely, *Blanche Among the Talented Tenth*, p. 59
[491] Neely, *Blanche Among the Talented Tenth*, p. 59
[492] Neely, *Blanche Among the Talented Tenth*, p. 59
[493] Attica Locke, The Cutting Season, (London: Serepents Tail, 2012), p. 25
[494] Locke, p. 72

significant that Locke would choose her victim to be a migrant, opening up a discussion about how racial injustices are still prevalent in American society today.[495]

It is also important to remember an unseen, but influential, character in this story – Madame Rosa. Blanche pays a visit to Madame Rosa after feeling conflicted about her relationship with Leo, a man that wished to marry her, but married another woman after she refused. Blanche's distaste for people that are too focused on image is repeated here in her belief that Leo married Luella Johnson simply because 'the man wanted was someone to call wife, period' and cared little about who the woman was. Blanche had 'never rejected him, only marriage', and might still have been with him if he could put his pride around labels aside.[496] Madame Rosa tells her that she was 'at a major crossroad in her life and the dream was trying to tell her something about the change that was coming'.[497] Rosa tells her to 'go to Mother Water. Honor and praise her, tell her about this dream… ask her for its meaning, for the memory of it… she will answer you before you leave that place… there are connections she wishes you to make there'.[498] Madame Rosa adds a spiritual element to Blanche's journey, and foreshadows that as well as investigating a crime, Blanche will also be thrown into an investigation into her own identity as an African American woman.

Neely's Blanche White novels offer a rare glimpse into the inner world of the black domestic, and how she carries out private, secret investigations. Despite Blanche not being a traditional male, police detective, Neely's stories largely fulfil the trope of the American crime fiction genre regardless. Each novel includes an investigation into a crime, a criminal and a grand reveal that a

[495] Alison Flood, 'The Cutting Season by Attica Locke – Review', *The Guardian,* (2012) p. 1
[496] Neely, *Blanche Among the Talented Tenth*, p. 12
[497] Neely, *Blanche Among the Talented Tenth*, p. 13
[498] Neely, *Blanche Among the Talented Tenth*, p. 13

reader would expect of the genre; Stefano Tani distils this down to 'the detective, the process of detection, and the solution'.[499] Yet, this process is private and kept between Blanche, Neely's narrator, and the reader until the final moment. Another important aspect of Blanche's investigative style is her reliance on gossip and covert observation to gather her information on her suspects. Blanche, an African American domestic worker, is a very intentional choice of protagonist for Neely, since she can act as a mouthpiece to open discussions of double consciousnesses, passing within the African American community, euro-centric beauty standards and feelings of invisibility.

[499] Tani, p. 41

Conclusion

In this thesis I have claimed that detective figure took on a new role in African American crime fiction in the 20th century, shifting from a characters in fictional stories about fictional crimes, to mouthpieces for writers to discuss real-world issues. From protagonists becoming slowly aware of their own double consciousness as African Americans, to movements towards 'anti-detective' fiction as the rigid and formulaic crime novel is increasingly subverted, to discussion of American social issues such as housing inequality, institutionalized racism within the justice system and objectification of African American women, these novels are political to their core. The genre attracted social activists, social realism writers and journalists that were looking for an opportunity to sensationalize their political commentary, grabbing the attention of readers and inspiring them in a way that newspapers and essays failed to. These stories cast African Americans in the role of protagonist with the intention of using them to discuss the discrimination that they experience. These writers turned to 'one of the most popular forms of fiction published in the United States' to broadcast their social commentaries to the American public. After all, these arguments are most impactful when written by those that are affected by the issues they discuss; Mimi Wesson wrote that Barbara Neely taught her more about intersectional feminism 'than a dozen essays'[500] These propagandistic social commentaries evolved into respected literature and dominated the market. These stories inspired a generation of readers and continue to act as important historical documents and educational material today.

[500] Wesson, p. 22

Among the political themes discussed within crime fiction, double consciousness is a popular choice. Taking a readership on a journey towards understanding the second plane of consciousness that African Americans exist on can act as a form of social commentary. In protagonists such as Easy Rawlins, Blanche White and Lutie Johnson, writers reflect on life as an African American in the 20th Century. The novels discussed in this dissertation all present social commentaries to their readerships, whilst following the formula of a detective novel - an investigation, a slow reveal of clues and an eventual grand reveal. Some protagonists, such as Barbara Neely's Blanche White, are aware of their own double consciousness as an African American from the outset, but many learn a series of difficult lessons about racial discrimination in 20th Century America, and take their readers along this journey with them. The protagonists referenced in this dissertation are just a few of many examples of African American detective figures that are designed to offer an insight into life on a secondary place of consciousness. For example, in Ann Petry's *The Street*, there is a discussion of the objectification of African American women; her protagonist, Lutie Johnson is assaulted, harassed, attacked and manipulated by the men around her and her anger at this manifests itself in a gruesome murder as the novel concludes. In Chester Himes' *If He Hollers Let Him Go*, there is a discussion of the institutionalized racism within the justice system, as the protagonist is harshly punished for a crime he does not commit. Using novels as a way to discuss these real world issues became a trope of the genre, and fiction proved to be a more impactful place to raise these issues than non-fiction newspapers and journals. Crime writers achieved this using a range of methods - from the subversive anti-detective novel tradition, to the discussion of W.E.B DuBois' theory of 'double consciousness', to utilizing elements of the popular pulp fiction trend, to choosing historically black settings such as Harlem as backdrops for their stories. This dissertation has aimed to

present a variety of approaches to the same dilemma – the anti-detective, hardboiled detective, private detective and domestic detective may appear to be unrelated characters but they were all created to fill the same role: inspiring spokespeople for a frustrated community of people

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