The Modern in the Postmodern: Walter Mosley, Barbara Neely, and the Politics of Contemporary African-American Detective Fiction

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He was a cop by trade and I was a criminal by color.


Did white people have any idea how much energy and hope and downright stubbornness it took to live and work and try to find some fun in a place where you were always the first to be suspected, regardless of the crime?

Barbara Neely, Blanche Passes Go (2000)

Since 1990, Walter Mosley, Barbara Neely, Eleanor Taylor Bland, Anthony Gar Haywood, Nichelle Tramble, and Valerie Wilson Wesley, among other African-American authors, have chosen to write not just one detective novel but a series of detective novels. In response to that ever-expanding list of authors and works, quite a few essays and book-length studies of contemporary African-American and “ethnic” detective fiction have been published in recent years. Despite this scholarly attention to African-American detective fiction, the reasons for its contemporary flourishing remain mysterious. Paula Woods, a groundbreaking scholar of the fiction, has argued that the use of black detective-protagonists “lets readers know that African Americans are not just the victims or perpetrators...
of crimes but are also those who try to correct the balance that murder upsets” (xv). In considering why so many writers are currently working in the genre, however, Woods only speculates briefly: “Perhaps as an outgrowth of the hunger Americans of all colors have developed for black writing, African American mystery writers have also begun to claim the spotlight” (xvii). Similarly, Stephen Soitos, in one of the earliest book-length studies of African-American detective fiction, notes the “recent revival of interest in the detective novel by black writers” but concludes about this revival simply that “black detective authors have gained a measure of respectability and recognition … as readership and acceptance of black detectives [have] become more diverse” (225). In a more recent essay, Helen Lock goes farther, arguing that “interest in [African American] detective fiction … can be at least partially explained by … [its] relevance to the realities, concerns, and history—indeed the entire epistemology—of the African American experience” (88). Although here Lock does start to get at the “why” of the question, she does not address the “when.” Nicole King considers the “when” in her examination of several African-American novels published in the 1980s—a period, she asserts, that “called forth a resurgence of nostalgic affirmations black community” (212)—but her consideration of the literary-racial politics of her chosen novels, which include Mosley’s Devil in a Blue Dress, does not take genre, the “what,” into account. Doris Witt comes closest to solving the mystery, arguing that the detective work of Blanche White, Barbara Neely’s serial protagonist, “is very centrally a decoding of contemporary United States body politics, as inflected by sexuality, gender, ethnicity, race, class, age, and (dis)ability” (166). On the contrary, Witt’s argument applies not to African-American detective fiction in general, but solely to Neely’s novels, and, even more specifically, to Neely’s novels in contradistinction to “the urban male-oriented writings of Walter Mosley” (167). Certainly, the Blanche White series—with its female detective, sometimes rural settings, and focus on Blanche’s children and lovers—does not fit comfortably into the masculinist “hard-boiled” subgenre of detective fiction that clearly includes Mosley’s Easy Rawlins series. But the crime genre, more broadly conceived, serves some of the same functions for both authors.

Mosley and Neely, along with a number of other African-American writers, have chosen a past genre because it suits their literary and political purposes. First, in writing crime novels, contemporary black writers are enacting a kind of literary-generic anachronism in order to comment on a distinct lack of progress regarding race within legal, penal, and judicial systems in the US. Walter Mosley uses crime fiction as the ideal form in which to expose and narrate the still-lived experience of what his detective
Easy Rawlins terms being “criminal by color” (*Little Scarlet* 235). Despite the Easy Rawlins novels’ historical settings, the past is not past for the detective, and the series shows that much remains the same for him in Los Angeles even across decades. Along with such interracial political commentary, there is intraracial social commentary embedded in African-American detective fiction as well. In the late twentieth century, contemporary literary and cultural theory, social science, and biogenetics have undone race itself; as a result, the nature of modern and postmodern African-American identity has become an increasingly irresolvable mystery, one that invites use of the detective form. It is no coincidence that the very first African-American detective fiction emerged at the turn of the twentieth century in the short stories of Pauline Hopkins and then flourished in the 1920s with the novels and short stories of Rudolph Fisher and George Schuyler—both periods when the nature of African-American subjectivity was being intensively investigated and reconstructed by African Americans themselves. Many contemporary African-American detective novels pose questions regarding the possibilities for collective black subjectivity, but Barbara Neely’s novels in particular try, and generally fail, to figure out how to establish blackness outside the forces of the law. Across four novels, her detective, Blanche White, fails to sustain a healthy adult relationship with any African-American person other than her “home girl,” Ardell. In sum, Walter Mosley’s and Barbara Neely’s detective fictions operate precisely at the intersection of two ongoing mysteries regarding race in the US. Those mysteries—one centering on color-coded justice, the other on elusive black identity—ultimately resolve, in much contemporary African-American detective fiction, and its criticism, into a single stubborn, racially inflected mystery surrounding families and genealogies, both literal and literary.

Mosley has inherited the hard-boiled subgenre of detective fiction that originated with the novels of Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler. As a number of critics have argued, the first hard-boiled fiction cannot be understood apart from the national, political, and social contexts of the 1930s and 1940s. In *Gumshoe America*, Sean McCann describes hard-boiled fiction as a Depression-era “cultural complaint” (5) about the “poverty of liberal theory” (16). Arising out of “populist cynicism and its air of fatality,” (3) it exposes “the classic mystery tale” as “a political myth … [that] no longer corresponded to the complex realities of an urban, industrial society” (18). According to McCann, if classic mysteries of the nineteenth century, such as the Sherlock Holmes stories, represented the genius-detective as triumphantly reasserting late Victorian legal and social order over and against the lawlessness of individual desires, the 1930s Sam Spade and Philip Marlowe novels represent
the philosopher-detective as cynically discovering that the modern legal and social order is neither redemptive nor consolatory. In fact, it may be both incompetent and malignant, particularly toward vulnerable individuals (89–91). Regarding Chester Himes, McCann concludes that the “traditional preoccupation” of the hard-boiled genre with legal failures and injustices offered “a perfect means to dramatize the intimate relations between racism and American democracy” at mid-century, resulting in Himes’s “vision of American society as a violent and absurd racial carnival” (252).

Since the 1990 publication of the first in his series of detective novels, *Devil in a Blue Dress*, Walter Mosley has entered and expanded that carnival, along with the hard-boiled tradition. Despite the Easy Rawlins novels’ 1990 to early 2000s publication dates, their protagonist operates very much like the detectives in Hammett and Chandler’s novels, as a few critics have argued. With a “lone wolf” private investigator negotiating a complex and corrupt social landscape, the series even takes place, as did Mosley’s predecessors’ novels, in Los Angeles. Remarkably, however, the greater part of scholarship on Mosley’s Easy Rawlins series has centered on the degree of *difference* it attains from white detective fiction and concomitantly on the extent of its formal subversion and social progressiveness. Gilbert Muller insists that “[t]he most significant influence on the Mosley is not so much the pantheon of white writers of detective fiction as it is Chester Himes,” and Muller calls the two authors “transcontinental twins” (293)—although Himes’s crime novels were set in Harlem rather than in Los Angeles and they feature two police officers, Coffin Ed and Gravedigger Jones, rather than a lone private investigator. Similarly, Helen Lock insists that Easy Rawlins “is a lot more than simply a darker-skinned version of Philip Marlowe or Sam Spade” (77). For Lock, Mosley’s detective novels represent an “African American experience of double-consciousness, especially in the urban America of the period” (78). While reaching a very different conclusion, Roger Berger also carefully measures the novels as potential “texts of difference,” arguing that their “black characters and locations … and their generic ‘violations’ of the hardboiled detective story” do in fact produce difference from white antecedents (281). But Berger concludes that such literary-formal differences are not sufficient to “disentangle” Mosley “from the reactionary politics … embedded in the genre” (292).

Critics have been just as uneasy with the idea that Chester Himes could be like white writers. They have, for instance, long struggled with Himes’s famous assertion that he wrote quite traditional detective stories and “just made the faces black” (qtd. in Williams 48). Immediately after supplying that well-known quotation, Sean McCann counters it: “Given Himes’s inventiveness with the
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genre, that remark must be taken as one of the better examples of false modesty in the history of popular writing” (252). But permitting Himes and Mosley their *sameness*, as well as their difference, will clarify the stakes in their return to a “white” genre born in and of the 1930s. If we agree with McCann that hard-boiled detective fiction of the 1930s functions as a period-specific “cultural complaint,” then we should understand Mosley’s Easy Rawlins novels, and African-American detective fiction in general, in the same way. The “complex meditation[s]” of Hammett, Chandler, and Himes “on the hopes and disappointments of New Deal liberalism” (308) are matched by Mosley’s ongoing meditation on political, social, and legal promises, repeatedly made and repeatedly broken, within a pre- and post-Civil Rights era US. Mosley’s and others’ return to a quintessentially modern and quintessentially cynical genre *now* is to argue that we have not yet earned the “post” in postmodernity. We have not solved the fundamental mystery of the liberal democratic state: how to achieve liberty and justice for each and for all. Same-ness just as much as difference becomes, then, a deeply political and historically engaged literary argument, with Mosley rightly taking his place alongside Chandler and Hammett, his literary “ancestors” to use Ralph Ellison terms, in a genealogy of hard-boiled detective fiction writers.

That genealogy also throws into relief the fact that Mosley is writing, at once, detective fiction and historical fiction. Actually, he is writing *doubly* historical fiction: the Easy Rawlins’s novels are historical at both meta-generic and local-content levels, with period mattering just as much as genre in each of the books. Mosley’s ongoing, color-coded Easy Rawlins series began with *Devil in a Blue Dress* (1990) set in 1948, followed by *Red Death* (1991) set in 1951, *White Butterfly* (1992) set in 1956, *Black Betty* (1994) set in 1961, *A Little Yellow Dog* (1996) set in 1963, *Bad Boy Brawly Brown* (2003) set in 1964, and, most recently, *Little Scarlet* (2004) set in 1965. But temporal layers in and of themselves do not necessarily distinguish Mosley’s from other detective fiction. Tzvetan Todorov, following Van Dine and Burton, has argued for a “duality” of narrative timelines in all detective novels. As Todorov puts it, the “whodunit … carries not one but two stories: the story of the crime and the story of the investigation” (44). Throughout the Easy Rawlins series, however, Walter Mosley adopts *and supplements* that characteristic temporal duality of detective fiction; in each novel, we encounter not just two stories and two timelines, crime and investigation, but at least two additional timelines and stories resulting from Mosley’s juxtaposition of the modern and the contemporary. And, to the degree that the contemporary turns out to look much like the modern—in fact, to be the *same*—Mosley’s novels work as
literary-political statements. He chooses to return in the 1990s and early 2000s to a genre born of 1930s discontent in order to write novels set in the 1940s–60s, thereby enacting a complex process of literary anachronism that describes and inscribes present-day injustice and discontent.

Black Betty, for example, takes place in 1961 but was published in 1994. The plot turns on Easy’s search for the missing title character, who had been working as a domestic servant for a wealthy white family. Easy is hired by the family to find Betty, ostensibly in order that she might receive an inheritance following the death of the family’s patriarch. In his pursuit of her, Easy travels from Watts to a Beverly Hills gated community and back, encountering and uncovering police brutality and a great deal of white-on-black violence along the way. Clearly, the novel is commenting simultaneously on the Los Angeles—and the US—both of its setting and its publication date. Mosley’s early 1960s Los Angeles, that will soon erupt in the 1965 Watts uprising, offers a clear parallel to the Los Angeles of thirty years later, which will erupt in 1992, again as a result of economic and judicial injustice. Yet the time in which Black Betty is set appeared to be a time of promise, particularly for African Americans. At the beginning of the story, Easy says, “I tried to think of better things. About our new Irish president and Martin Luther King; about how the world was changing, and a black man in America had the chance to be a man for the first time in hundreds of years” (45). His naming of Kennedy and King suggests that the narrative itself holds out little hope for real change. Just as readers are aware that both figures will be assassinated, Easy, with a kind of cynical prescience, abruptly checks his own optimism: “I wanted to feel better but all I had was the certainty that the world had passed me by—leaving me and my kind dead or making death in the dark causeways” (46).

The time in which Black Betty was written and published, the early 1990s, also appeared to be a time of promise, and again, especially for African Americans. A man whom Toni Morrison would later famously and controversially term “our first black president,” was about to be elected (32). African-American writers had particular cause for optimism about this reading president. As the New York Times noted in December 1992, the Clintons “read books of all sorts … [a]nd that is the most striking feature of a cultural profile of the first-family-to-be” (Honan C15). Even before the election, Bill Clinton had been profiled as a voracious reader, with mysteries among his favorites. In August 1992, the then Boston Globe journalist Michael Frisby described a campaign flight with Clinton during which the candidate “admitted to being an avid book reader and cited two of his recent favorites as the mystery detective novels Devil in a Blue...
In his next novel, Mosley offered what I consider to be a response to the “first fan,” as well as a commentary on Clinton’s 1992 campaign image as a common man and his political promises of expanded opportunities for all Americans. Frisby also covered a September 1992 political rally, noting that Clinton “promised yesterday to bring a new approach to government … [saying], ‘I have done my best for more than a year now to offer the American people a new approach, one that goes beyond trickle-down economics without going back to tax and spend’” (27). In Frisby’s words, the candidate was “returning to a theme” (27). Clinton was, after all, “The Man from Hope” in the famous and extraordinarily effective video from the 1992 Democratic convention, with the very first words of the video spoken by Clinton himself: “I was born in a little town called Hope, Arkansas.” As if in direct reply to that candidate, soon to be president, Easy declares in the second chapter of the 1994 *Black Betty*: “hope is the harshest kind of dreaming” (57). Easy’s rather hopeless version of “hope” reflects his restricted social position that in turn shapes his methods of detection: “Hunches,” he explains, “are a desperate man’s way to hope” (330).8 Easy’s livelihood, itself a mode of understanding and moving in a highly racialized urban American landscape, renders “hope” unreliable either as an epistemology or a means of upward social mobility.9 Such riffing on Clinton’s campaign rhetoric of birthplace-as-policy detects and discloses the nonuniversality of such narratives of bootstrapped success as the one that took the candidate from Hope, Arkansas, to the White House. Easy concludes that “a better day might have been coming, for some people—but not for everyone” (46).

In the latest installment in the series, Easy even suspends his own moral code because of persistent racial injustice: “It hadn’t felt right …. But the denizens of Watts were under the law with no say …. I would have put Mouse [Easy’s ultra-violent best friend] in the White House if I could have” (*Little Scarlet* 204–5). Mosley, through his detective narrator, seems to be replying not just to Clinton but also to Toni Morrison, reminding us that there remain substantive differences between a figure like Easy Rawlins or Raymond Alexander (Mouse) and one like Bill Clinton. For example, Easy describes a chillingly familiar encounter with the LAPD:

Six men! Policemen. There were around the car and in the doors before I could even think.
I was dragged from the front seat and thrown to the asphalt.

“Spread ‘em!”

“Get the keys. Search the vehicle.”

They went through my clothes and cuffed my hands behind my back.

“Hey, man! What’d I do?” I shouted.

That got me a nightstick pressed hard across the back of my neck.

“You just shut up,” an angry voice whispered in my ear (Black Betty 125).

The police take Easy to jail: “My chin sure hurt later when I woke up in my new jail cell. My chest hurt too, and my arm and the back of my hand. A big knot had swollen up above my diaphragm and my side ached awfully. He must have hit me after I was out. That’s the only way I could understand it, all those bumps and bruises” (133). These echoes of the Rodney King beating suggest that at least some things are liable to stay the same, across time, for poor and working-class black men in Los Angeles. As Easy says in Little Scarlet, “no matter how far back you remember, there’s a beatin’ there waiting for you” (48). However, we must acknowledge that while sameness helps produce the literary and political power of Mosley’s and other African-American authors’ detective fiction, so does difference.

Not all critics have privileged the differences between Mosley and his protagonist and white hard-boiled detective fiction authors and their protagonists. Helen Lock explains that Easy, like all the classic hard-boiled detectives, “operates in a frequently murky borderland between good and evil [and] is thus an essentially liminal figure” (78). Just as Lock argues, Easy does possess the typical hard-boiled detective’s liminality in that he dwells between regions, classes, and discourses, between legality and illegality, and between legitimacy and illegitimacy. However, I would extend and complicate her argument. Yes, Easy’s liminality resembles Sam Spade and Philip Marlowe’s, but it is, at the same time, both racially specific and highly individual. Easy’s version of being “in between” actually sets him apart from Chandler and Hammett’s detectives and permits him to exceed their cultural and racial scripts. His sameness—in this instance at least—is different. Theodore Mason agrees, asserting
that, for Easy, “the borders between ‘races’ and between genders” are “the site not only of the criminal act but also … the site of culturally transgressive possibility” (173).

Easy crosses a number of borders over the course of the series. We learn at the beginning of the first novel that Easy is a black World War II veteran who has migrated from Houston to Los Angeles (Devil 2, 4). That collective, raced, and gendered experience of the Great Migration and of segregated wartime service is perhaps best represented by Easy’s flexible speech, yet that speech also reflects the contingencies of his experience, intelligence, and personality. In each of the books, he can and does shift smoothly among various forms of black vernacular and to standard English when he needs to. In Black Betty, Easy says of wealthy white clients, “I spoke in a dialect that they would expect” (122) and, in Bad Boy Brawly Brown, he says of a young African-American revolutionary, “My diction and grammar slid into the form I wanted Junior to hear” (49). Here, Junior and Easy share a racial identity, but Junior cannot detect or reproduce Easy’s linguistic shifts any more than can the rich whites in Black Betty.

Even more importantly, what Liam Kennedy terms Easy’s “social … mobility” far exceeds that of Sam Spade or Philip Marlowe, even if that mobility is, as Kennedy observes, “mold[ed]” by race (230). Throughout the series, Easy befriends and occasionally works with “Negro” (black and mixed race, African American, and Afro-Caribbean), white, Mexican, Asian, and Latino people; he even adopts a Mexican boy, Jesus, and a biracial girl, Feather. Such cross-racial alliances and family structures readily distinguish Easy from Hammett and Chandler’s detectives. Suggestively, Easy often forges those alliances on the basis of a shared distrust of white power structures that are typically represented by and concentrated within the police. In Black Betty, when his friend the Japanese-American librarian Miss Eto is being stalked, Easy asks her, “Why don’t you go to the cops?” (78). “Oh, no,” she replies, “Never go to the police.” Easy immediately declares, “Maybe that’s why I helped her” (78). His declaration points to the ways that race and class make a difference in crime and in crime fiction—in the case of race, so much so that even if Chester Himes and Walter Mosley both had simply “made the faces black” in their novels, they would have necessarily altered the meaning and power of the genre.

At the literal center of Black Betty, Easy says, “I’ve never really been what you would call a friend to the LAPD” (180). To paraphrase D. A. Miller, the police, along with the novel, mean differently when the main characters are black. To date, most criticisms of The Novel and the Police (1988) have centered on Miller’s argument that the novel as a genre functions as part of the disciplinary
mechanisms surrounding bourgeois subjectivity; Miller says of mid-nineteenth-century English novels: “Whenever the novel censures policing power, it has already reinvented it, in the very practice of novelistic representation” (20; emphasis in original). In Miller’s view, the “genre of the novel belongs to the disciplinary field it portrays” (21; emphasis in original). A number of literary scholars have objected to such a reading of the novel as essentially and always disciplinary, as being part of an overall social-regulatory system. Here I am less concerned with Miller’s view of the novel as nonliberatory or nonprogressive than I am with his neglect of race. The Victorian novels on which he bases his argument were being published at the same time as the earliest African-American novels, yet both the genealogies and the criticism for the two sets of texts have been and generally remain quite separate, and only a handful of critics have targeted Miller’s thesis in the context of his narrow racial, national, and temporal textual selections. Yumna Siddiqi, for one, challenges Miller by pointing to postcolonial novels, such as Arundhati Roy’s The God of Small Things and Amitav Gosh’s The Circle of Reason, that “cast suspicion on the repressive apparatuses of the state” (177). To the degree that there are always targets of colonial or racial policing who do not match the form of subjectivity desired by the state and produced by Miller’s chosen novels, his theory cannot hold. As Siddiqi observes, in many postcolonial novels “the forces of police criminalize the protagonists” (176). Likewise, as this essay’s epigraphs suggest, quite a few contemporary African-American detective novels represent a protagonist who is both detective and perceived criminal because of race, thereby complicating Miller’s conclusion about the novel’s always-state-interested cultural and disciplinary work. Of course, Miller would be well within his rights to point out that both Siddiqi and I take his argument out of temporal context; his thesis, after all, pertained to Victorian novels. However, the intertwining of race and criminality that we find in Mosley’s and Neely’s novels did not begin with contemporary African-American detective fiction.

From its very origins and on into the present, African-American fiction has articulated and analyzed the intersection of crime and color in the US. A character in Frederick Douglass’s 1853 novella, The Heroic Slave, says of the black protagonist: “Here is indeed a man of rare endowments, a child of God,—guilty of no crime but the color of his skin” (135). Half a century later, in Pauline Hopkins’s 1900 short story “Talma Gordon,” a white man rejects his passing-for-white fiancée, who is suspected of murder, crying, “I could stand the stigma of murder, but add to that the pollution of Negro blood! No man is brave enough to face such a situation” (16). Much later, Chester Himes turned the tables by declaring in his 1976 autobiography: “I could not name the white man who was guilty
because all white men were guilty” (102). Now, contemporary
detective fiction offers a concentrated, extended means to investi-
gate the continued construction of race via crime and its policing
even as the fictionality of race has been largely accepted. In Barbara
Neely’s 1994 Blanche Among the Talented Tenth, the characters
bond, despite their profound color and class conflicts, over distrust
of the police; thus, the police themselves construct blackness. For
example, the dark-skinned working-class Blanche White “shared”
with the light-skinned wealthy academic Mattie a “lack of faith in
the police” (122). “In her experience,” Blanche explains, regardless
of their circumstances, “black people who called the cops stood a
good chance of being abused instead of assisted” (122–23). Even
when they don’t “call the cops,” black people, Blanche knows, must
always view their own behavior from the perspective of the police.
As she says in the first novel of the series: “A running black person
was still a target of suspicion” (Blanche on the Lam 6). Just so, Easy
Rawlins, also in the first novel of the series, tells us: “It was fifteen
blocks to John’s speak and I had to keep telling myself to slow
down. I knew that a patrol car would arrest any sprinting Negro they
encountered” (Devil 76). Easy Rawlins has been shaped by racially
marked disciplinary structures not just in his reactions and his out-
ward behavior but in his inner being as well. His is a raced emo-
tional and epistemological interior: he fears the police because he
knows what they can and will do to him.

Once again, in Mosley’s exploration of his protagonist’s
racialized psychological terrain, we can see a literary politics of
sameness and difference at work. Easy spends time in altered or lim-
inal states, seemingly just like the detectives who preceded him.
Sherlock Holmes had his opium fogs and his trance-like episodes of
intense concentration; Sam Spade and Philip Marlowe had their
moments of ruminating and philosophizing, so often parodied now.
Easy Rawlins’s characteristic liminal states include fear, rage, and,
most of all, dreams. As of the first page of Black Betty, he is dream-
ing (43–44), and the novel as a whole is punctuated by his recurrent
dreams and nightmares. Suggestively, Easy is not simply dreaming
in Black Betty; throughout, he is dreaming of the past. The book
begins with Easy’s dream of his past experiences with the title char-
acter, Black Betty, and it ends with his telling us, “I’d been thinking
about the young people I remembered in my dreams” (280). Unlike
past detectives’ altered states, Easy’s also constitute liminal tempo-
ral states; he is suspended between past and present as he dreams,
reinforcing and expanding the political commentary initiated by his
resemblance to past hard-boiled detectives.

Easy has lived through and observed World War II and the
postwar years, the beginnings of the civil rights and Black Power
movements, the assassination of Kennedy, the Vietnam war, and the 1965 Watts riots. He thus embodies the memory and past of a particular community. His allegorical role becomes clear in *Little Scarlet*, set in 1965 Los Angeles:

[I]t was as if there was a strong wind at my back. I had resisted it all through the riots: the angry voice in my heart that urged me to go out and fight after all of the hangings I had seen, after all of the times I had been called nigger and all of the doors that had been slammed in my face. I spent my whole early life at the back of buses and in the segregated balconies at theaters. I had been arrested for walking in the wrong part of town and threatened for looking a man in the eye. And when I went to war to fight for freedom, I found myself in a segregated army, treated with less respect than they treated German POWs. I had seen people who looked like me jeered on TV and in the movies. I had had enough and I wasn’t about to turn back, even though I wanted to. (18–19)

Both author and protagonist seek to represent stories and characters often neglected by mainstream histories of American and African-American culture. Walter Mosley has said, “I want to map that migration through the deep South and to the West of black people. Because one of the things—and this is because we haven’t been that involved in the center of the literary world, people of color—a lot of our histories are left out of the fiction” (Moyers). Analogously, Easy Rawlins knows he must live to tell the story, for if he fails, “Who would have survived to be witness against [these] crimes?” (129). Here, the urgent mission of the detective is not so much to solve the mystery as it is to investigate and narrate, to remember and relate a history of race relations in the US from the perspective of a common person. Easy notes and values not just the grand, public acts of the civil rights movement but the minor, private acts of resistance to white power and privilege. He describes one such moment as “a little piece of history that happened right there in that room and went unrecorded” (*Black Betty* 220).

Easy is documenting a history that is national and familial—and ongoing. Just as we cannot help likening his early 1960s Los Angeles setting to early 1990s LA, we cannot help connecting his history with our present. The plot of *Black Betty* turns on the disclosure of a secret interracial family. Betty, while employed as a maid by the wealthy white Cain family, bore two children as a result of rape by—or, at the very least, coerced sex with—the family’s patriarch, Albert Cain. Upon his death, Cain leaves Betty nearly all his property, in atonement; yet, his white family breaks the will in a trial
that leaves her “destroyed,” disinherited, and made “to seem like a whore who had beguiled Albert Cain” (359). Even when made public, the truth of the sexual exploitation of a black woman and the resulting interracial family cannot shake the legal genealogy of whiteness. This story should sound familiar to us, and it demonstrates that if literary history continues to insist upon racial separateness, then so does much political history. It was only quite recently that Strom Thurmond’s own secret interracial family came to light. Essie Mae Washington Williams also “went unrecorded,” publicly and formally, until December 2003 when she came forward after the senator’s death. She was his first child, born in 1925 when Thurmond was twenty-two, as a result of an affair with his family’s black maid, who was sixteen at the time. Though his mixed race family took priority in time, it certainly did not take priority in official narratives of Thurmond’s personal or political history. Although his “mixed” past was a kind of open secret in Washington, none of his obituaries from the summer of 2003 mentioned what a Slate writer terms “the most interesting of his sundry racial legacies” (McWhorter). Thus, the Easy Rawlins series travels back in time to recover and record a national genealogical history that remains in need of publication.

To complicate matters further, there is yet another kind of time travel taking place throughout the series. The detective is narrating each of the novels from some indefinite point in the future. Easy tells us, for example, what “retired” meant to black men at the time of Black Betty: “Back in 1961 that meant you worked ‘part-time’ forty hours a week and paid your own insurance” (64). This additional temporal layer permits Easy to comment on both the period of the novels and his own development. Easy does change and learn, despite the seemingly unchanging nature of his surroundings, and his most significant change regards gender. A number of critics have noted a troubling masculinism in the Easy Rawlins’s novels; Doris Witt, for one, holds up Barbara Neely’s novels “as an alternative to the ‘boys in the hood’ fixation of much of early 1990s United States culture—a fixation that contributed to the enthusiastic reception of Mosley’s Easy Rawlins and his loyal, if violent friend Mouse” (167). Black Betty in particular invites such feminist critique. In the book, Easy is perpetually searching for Betty, the mysterious pursued who is deferred until nearly the end of the novel—she first appears on page 294 of a 360-page edition. At first, Easy describes her as “a great shark of a woman” desired by virtually all the men in the book (49). By novel’s end, she is threatened and infantilized, exposed and defeated; she is rendered “pitiful” (344). Along the way, we learn that Betty constitutes the origin of Easy’s own sexuality; he says that “the first time [he] had sex” was with her (247).
Note that here Easy is not referring to an actual sexual experience with Betty but to an experience of voyeurism. As a child, he once watched her having sex with a man, and his extreme arousal at the sight made it his “first time” (247). This simulacrum of a sexual experience points to the falseness that underpins Easy’s pursuit of Black Betty as his fantasy, the embodiment of authentic, essential, and irresistible black female sexuality.

But we must not rush to an equation of Easy’s troubling 1960s gender politics, written down in the 1990s, with 1930s hard-boiled masculinism. For one thing, Easy harbors a kind of nascent feminism; as he thinks back about his failures, he wonders, “Maybe it was because I never learned to respect women” (174). Here, the modern-in-the-postmodern African-American male detective realizes that what he most sorely lacked in 1961 was the second-wave feminism that was then emerging. In a sense, Easy Rawlins should be looking for Neely’s Blanche White rather than his Black Betty. Both are dark-skinned women working as domestics for wealthy white families; both have been raped by men in those families (we learn in the very first novel of Neely’s series about her detective-protagonist’s earlier rape). But quite unlike Betty, Blanche, herself a product of the 1960s, is not rendered “pitiful” nor is she “destroyed”—as of the most recent installment, she successfully takes revenge on her rapist. In Mosley’s two most recent Easy Rawlins novels, the detective seems to have learned the kind of lessons in black feminism that Blanche could teach, with powerful women of color occupying ever more of his time and attention. In Bad Boy Brawly Brown (2002), set in 1964, Easy reports that his new girlfriend, Bonnie Shay, “was in every way my equal” (222). Little Scarlet (2004) ends with a sense of optimism, not on political or social grounds but on the grounds of friendship between a black man and a black woman: “You watch out, girl,” says Easy, “You just might make me into a happy man” (306). This uncharacteristically optimistic conclusion suggests that the personal, if not the political, could provide a site for change—even hope—for the black community that remains steadily at the center of the Easy Rawlins novels.

Even as they revolve around a separate and vital black community, Mosley’s novels do not posit a singular blackness. As Nicole King argues, Mosley “use[s] intra-racial class difference, especially middle-class aspirations, to refute the romance of grand narratives of blackness” (211). The processes of migration and class differentiation so well documented in the Easy Rawlins series have characterized post-emancipation African-American historical experience, especially in the twentieth century; as a result, Easy’s experiences metonymize the increasing elusiveness of an African-American community or identity. Once he leaves Houston’s Fifth Ward, his
community rapidly expands to include not only cross-racial friendships and alliances but ever more varieties of blackness as well. His cherished girlfriend in the recent novels is not African American but Caribbean, and she represents for him yet another version of blackness; Bonnie “was born in British Guyana but her father was from Martinique, so there was the music of the French language in her English accent” (2).

Mosley’s novels are not alone within contemporary African-American detective fiction in functioning on this complex intraracial level. Barbara Neely, like Walter Mosley, is writing a series of detective novels that explore the nature, indeed the very possibility, of black community at a time when the idea of unified blackness has been discredited. It may be at least in part because of Neely’s seemingly anachronistic, and even possibly reactionary, preoccupation with reforging black identity that her novels have remained largely outside current academic discourse. Mosley’s novels, by contrast, have been the subject of a great deal of both popular and academic interest. Nevertheless, the two series have much in common. Like Mosley’s Easy Rawlins novels, Neely’s four Blanche White novels seek to represent, in allegorical fashion, a narrative of recent black history. They have followed Blanche’s migration from her hometown of Farleigh, North Carolina, to urban, Northeastern black neighborhoods (Harlem and Roxbury), in a kind of contemporary reenactment of the Great Migration. In the most recent installment, Blanche Passes Go (2000), Blanche returns South, just as many African Americans are currently doing, suggesting that the series as a whole offers a kind of compressed version of twentieth-century and early-twenty-first-century migratory trends. Throughout her travels, Blanche encounters a great deal of white racism, but unlike Easy Rawlins, she finds intraracial conflict surrounding gender, color, and class exceptionally troubling. In Blanche Among the Talented Tenth (1994), the second in the series, Blanche commiserates with another dark-skinned woman, explaining that prejudice from other African Americans “hurts more anything any white person could ever do to us” (128). How to achieve black unity stands as the paramount mystery throughout the Blanche White series, and it clearly overshadows the actual crimes. Yet, for Neely, the detective form remains crucial because it suits her political and literary purposes; as she puts it, “I realized the mystery genre was perfect to talk about serious subjects, and it could carry the political fiction I wanted to write. In a way, I feel the genre chose me” (Collette).

Her protagonist’s identity permits Neely to, in her words, “examine race and class from the point of view of a working-class black woman” (Lewis 24) and to investigate the nature of blackness, past, and present. Neely’s doubly ironically named Blanche White is
a “deep black,” size sixteen, forty-something domestic worker by choice, whose self-proclaimed nosiness repeatedly leads her into mystery and often into danger (Blanche Among 1). Blanche represents a new sort of detective: black and female and working class, with those social categories driving the novels’ content. The title of Neely’s 1994 Blanche Among the Talented Tenth testifies to the book’s preoccupation with a color-coded and classed version of African-American experience and history. In the novel, Blanche is vacationing at Amber Cove, a long-standing upper-class African-American resort community in New England, likely modeled after Oak Bluffs on Martha’s Vineyard. Another “brown-skinned,” working-class woman also vacationing at the resort terms the residents “[a]s hinty a bunch of Talented Tenths as you’d ever want to see” (65). In the world of the novel, Du Bois’s term could not possibly include either Blanche’s black companion, who loud-talks and wears bright colors, or Blanche herself (65). Deeply cynical about Amber Cove’s class and color politics, Blanche approaches the community with her own version of blackness functioning as the measure of authenticity. She observes that she is “the only guest present with any true color” (40) and concludes that at Amber Cove “the things, besides color, that made a person black were either missing or mere ghosts of their former selves” (58). But such racial measuring does not go unchallenged in the text.

At Amber Cove, Blanche encounters mostly light-skinned middle and upper class African-American characters; all seem destined to fail her tests of racial authenticity. First, she encounters Mattie, a famous black feminist historian, whom she initially identifies, and identifies with, as a model of the strong black woman, a “diva” in Blanche’s words (25, 41). Mattie ultimately does not measure up to Blanche’s standards for raced and gendered authenticity. Not only is she married to a white man, another academic, but we later discover that she has a son, born as the result of her years-earlier affair with a black man, whom she refuses to acknowledge publicly. As in Mosley’s Black Betty, here too we see a secret racial family, but in this case the secret affair and child are intraracial and the official, documented family interracial. This twist testifies to the novel’s—indeed the entire series’s—fundamental preoccupation with the obstacles to black identity and community. In Blanche Among the Talented Tenth, repressed family history, even when uncovered, cannot successfully forge a unitary blackness any more than it can forge an official, public interracial history in Black Betty. When Blanche confronts Mattie with knowledge of the affair and the secret black son, Mattie abruptly severs their connection, as if it were a “retractable bridge” (220). Blanche, in turn, promptly rejects Mattie, in terms of gender and race and perhaps class: “I see why
nobody’s ever called you girlfriend before. You don’t even know what the word means” (221).

Blanche’s second possible “connection” in the novel does give her some hope for establishing a long-term relationship with another black person. While at Amber Cover, she meets Tina—a young woman as dark as Blanche herself—who grew up “in the projects” of North Philadelphia, has recently graduated from Brown University, and plans to teach poor children in Boston (93, 95). With her long braids, beautiful full features, and deep black skin, Tina looks, says Blanche, like a “bronze head” or like the face on an “African coin” (67). Tina thus functions as a signifier of racial value; as she changes hands during the course of the novel, going from ally of Blanche to fiancée of a light-skinned, bourgeois young man, her racial and gender value decreases, along with Blanche’s interest in her. When Tina announces her engagement, all Blanche feels is “disappointment” (208), because “she didn’t think Durant was good enough for Tina” (181). Blanche’s “investment” (94) in Tina rapidly dwindles, and, as with Mattie, “distance … stretched between them” in the end (229). Blanche’s own ill-starred romance with the light-skinned Stuart, a long-time Amber Cove resident and Maine native, ends even more dismally when he is unmasked as the bad guy of the book (although not as a murderer). In the end, Blanche makes no new connections, and her friendship with her girlfriend Ardell remains the only relationship she keeps from the beginning to end of this novel—indeed from the beginning to end of the entire series. Her failure to connect with other people, especially other black people, sharply distinguishes the Blanche White series from the Easy Rawlins series, where widely varied friendships and characters are sustained from novel to novel. As a result, Neely’s novels appear far less sanguine, at least to date, about the interpersonal and familial as routes to sustained hope or stable community for African Americans.

Of course, in addition to such vexed questions of race, family, and community that pervade Blanche Among the Talented Tenth, there is an actual mystery going on. A longstanding and widely detested member of the Amber Cove community, Faith Brown, has been mysteriously electrocuted while bathing in the tub in her cottage. The investigation surrounding her death is conducted by Blanche, who arrives at Amber Cove just after the death occurs. The novel does, then, include Todorov’s dual narrative time lines of crime and investigation, but like the Easy Rawlins novels, Blanche Among the Talented Tenth deploys additional temporal layers. During her investigation of the electrocution, Blanche discovers that Faith’s foremost hobby had been to collect compromising history about her fellow Amber Cove residents. Nearly everyone at the
resort had an ugly secret from the past, it seemed, and therefore a motive for killing Faith. Remarkably, it turns out that Faith’s death was accidental; there had been no murder at all, although neither the reader nor Blanche realizes that fact until nearly the end of the book. So if there was no murder, what is the true mystery in *Blanche Among the Talented Tenth*? It is tempting to conclude that the novel does really want to investigate who—or what—has “killed faith.”

The narrative pivots on the painful reality of a fractured and tense African-American community, “a place,” Blanche explains, “where none of the color codes could be ignored” (227). An authentic mystery emerges from the fact that “color codes” still hold power, even as late as the 1990s, when race and color distinctions had been proven spurious. For Blanche, mystery inheres in the project of how to maintain that which she nonetheless urgently desires—namely, an intact and healthy African-American community, along with unprejudiced, egalitarian love relationships between African-American women and men. Unlike Easy Rawlins, Blanche has not, as of the latest book in the series, settled down with anyone and does not derive much hope from her love life. In *Blanche Passes Go*, Blanche does have a somewhat successful romance with the railroad man Thelvin, but it is marred by his jealousy, and at the end of the book she decides to return to Boston, committing neither to the South nor to him (318). Overall, Blanche is left with no clear-cut solution to the mystery of how to sustain either black community or heterosexual black love. She even has a recurrent dream, just as Easy does, but her dream speaks of isolation rather than a communal past: “The people were gone; even their voices were gone. And in the way of dreams, she knew that they were gone forever. That she had seen and heard her last human being; that she was alone in a way that made her understand the word as she had never done before” (*Blanche Among* 210–11). Her dream, she comes to understand, was at once about the “future,” about “now,” and about “memories”—with each period characterized by people “moving farther and farther away” (*Blanche Among* 223).

Blanche fails to make connections with other African Americans because her rhetoric of authenticity cannot lead either to community or to solution. Authentic blackness is by definition a receding mystery, the ever-detected yet never-found. Nevertheless, the pursuit of that mystery remains a frequent subject of contemporary African-American detective novels. In Mosley’s 2004 *Little Scarlet*, Easy notes of the aftermath of the 1965 riots: “that was the beginning of the breakup of our community” (77). The Blanche White novels are preoccupied with that “breakup” but date its origin differently. In *Blanche Among the Talented Tenth*, whose very title speaks of a mixture of time periods, Blanche responds to her “brown-skinned”
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companion’s use of the term “Talented Tenth,” by laughing and replying, “It’s been long time since I heard that old DuBois’s thing about the light-brights being the natural leaders of their darker brethren” (65). Blanche is right, the term is an old one: W. E. B. Du Bois first used it in a 1903 essay to describe his model of modern elite racial leaders whose duty it was to uplift the race—not only socially but politically and economically as well. Steeped in bourgeois social sensibilities but also in progressive politics, Du Bois’s Talented Tenth model was neither simply elitist nor predicated simply on lightness of skin; indeed, it was not simple at all. Blanche misremembers and misapplies the term “talented tenth” to Amber Cove’s class- and color-struck vacationers, whose shallow materialism and doomed aspirations toward whiteness reflect only dimly and partially Du Bois’s complex picture of racial uplift by a well-educated and progressive black leadership. In a sense, Blanche is doing the same thing that the dead Faith Brown had been doing: digging up and remembering an ugly, neither whole nor wholly accurate, version of an African-American past. By failing to take into account the full range of Du Bois’s intellectual and political work (she remembers his elitism, but not his socialism; his own light skin tone, but not his expatriation to Ghana; his prudish tastes, but not his suffragism), Blanche cannot solve the numerous race-, gender-, and class-based questions that arise during the course of the novel. She wonders why she is treating Tina poorly once the dark-skinned young woman has declared her allegiance to her light-skinned and insufficiently black or masculine (according to Blanche’s standards) fiancé. She wonders how she can get the white domestic worker who cleans her cottage to trust her. She wonders how a handsome, light-skinned African-American man could be attracted to her, a dark-skinned and not-thin woman. Blanche fails to provide answers to any of these provocative questions regarding social categories and allegiances because her own judgments and historical elisions echo Mattie’s repression of her intraracial family.

As we continue to seek answers to such questions as those Blanche asks herself, the novel’s blend of the modern and the postmodern—after all, Blanche in 1994 is still among the “Talented Tenth”—may offer a useful clue. Blanche embodies a black past; like Easy, she “still remembered the police beatings in the sixties” (Blanche on the Lam 89). She represents the protagonist-detective as anachronism, implying that investigation and recovery of past political perspectives might be the solution required in the present. When her adoptive son Malik asks when she stopped straightening her hair, Blanche replies: “It was the sixties. I was lucky enough to be in on the tail end of a time when some black folks were saying our dark skin and kinky hair have to be beautiful because they are ours .... It
was more than a fad for me” (*Blanche Among* 152). Blanche offers at once, paradoxically, a historied and atemporal alternative that challenges contingent stylings of blackness. As she tells us, via free indirect discourse, “In the sixties, women who looked like her became status symbols to be draped on revolutionary black arms like a piece of kitenge cloth. Now she mostly saw black couples of the same color and darker men with lighter women” (*Blanche Among* 36). Black Power and the slogan “Black is beautiful” should return, according to Blanche, but they must now consist of more than male-centered fashion statements. With her generous proportions, natural hair, dark skin, and self-designed version of ancestor worship (*Blanche Among* 61), the detective offers a possible solution to the mystery of black community, a solution that centers on prior cultural and bodily expressions of blackness yet cannot properly be termed nostalgic. Blanche is just as angry about the past as she is about the present.

Blanche’s temporal-political diagnosis and prescription point, once again, to the real mystery at the heart of the Blanche White series and to a provisional answer regarding the current flourishing of African-American detective fiction. The continued frustration of black community throughout Neely’s Blanche White novels and the continued interracial injustice in the Easy Rawlins’s novels result from an incomplete recovery of African-American and American political, intellectual, and family histories. Blanche White misremembers Du Bois even as she calls for a return to the past; Easy Rawlins shows us that the nation has often suppressed its interracial past, even as he lacks his own era’s feminism. Both characters and both series logically operate via an anachronistic process that, though flawed, serves to imagine solutions that are literary and political and intraracial and interracial. We would do well to attend to Blanche and Easy’s dreams of the past and present, because African-American detectives’ liminal states offer us something more than those of past detectives. Even if their vision is not perfect, Blanche White and Easy Rawlins see more clearly than did Sam Spade and Philip Marlowe—at least when it comes to solving our national, genealogical mysteries and diagnosing our early-twenty-first-century social ills. Both detectives uncomfortably insist on the continuing social reality and power of race—what Houston Baker, following Baraka, has termed “real-side referentiality” (387)—despite the postmodern fact that race is fiction. This is not to say that Blanche and Easy are ideal detectives; we should remain critical of their processes of detection. Nevertheless, they successfully investigate not just crime but family and literary histories—by both being and detecting the modern in the postmodern.
Notes


2. A number of critics have identified Neely’s Blanche White novels as examples of “cozy” detective fiction, a subgenre defined as mystery novels in which little harm comes to the detective or other characters (other than the initial murder), there is little sex or violence, and the setting consists of a confined, often rural place wherein the characters know one another. See, for example, Kathy Phillips, “Mystery Woman,” *Women’s Review of Books* 17 (July 2000): 43. Granted, three of the four novels in Neely’s Blanche White series seem at first glance to fit this definition. But in the 1999 installment, *Blanche Cleans Up*, Blanche is living in Roxbury and negotiating racism and city-wide corruption in Boston; moreover, Blanche herself is quite tough—mentally and physically—throughout the series. But the fact that she is physically assaulted at least once in every novel and has been raped means that the books really cannot be considered “cozy,” even if they match some of the subgenre’s characteristics. I would argue that they partake of both hard-boiled (Sam Spade) and cozy (Miss Marple) conventions.

3. A great deal of current African diasporic and African-Americanist literary scholarship is pressing home the point that “blackness” has never been unitary and that it has always been constructed in particular ways in particular times and places. See Michelle Wright’s *Becoming Black: Creating Identity in the African Diaspora* (2004) for a wonderful example. See also Madhu Dubey’s *Signs and Cities: Black Literary Postmodernism* (2003) and Brent Hayes Edwards’s *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism* (2003).

4. Crooks identifies Easy as typical of the hard-boiled hero in that he is “the most scrupulous and decent of the erring humans mired in the blindness of their cultural situations” and further, that “[i]n this respect Rawlins is hardly distinguishable from Philip Marlowe, Mike Hammer, or Kinsey Millhone” (85). Mosley himself observes that “Easy is a hard-boiled detective in as much as he works alone; he works by himself” (bookreporter.com). Although Easy becomes a family man during the series, he is—at least as far as his work goes—generally (although not always) a “lone wolf,” just as Mosley says. And, also like the traditional hard-boiled
hero, Easy is in the business of negotiating and disclosing an intricate and essentially corrupt urban social landscape; his investigation serves to analyze and diagnose that space, though his diagnosis may not yield a particularly effective prescription. Liam Kennedy succinctly describes this investigative process: Easy, like the typical detective, is “at once a liminal, rootless figure . . . and . . . a classless and self-reliant man,” whose detection “renders universal moral principles of truth and justice subjective and presages moral inquiry as the detective’s singular response to the atomized urban scenes of modernity” (225–26). As for the LA setting, quite a few critics have observed that the hard-boiled writers themselves have understood and even helped construct that role for the city. Paul Skenazy argues that, together, the LA hard-boiled novels have worked for decades to “create and dominate many of our insights into the spirit of this city and its citizens” (104). For Liahna Babener, Chandler delivers a “vision” of LA as “an empire built on a spurious foundation, decked in tinsel, and beguiled by its own spurious promises,” while Marlowe “likens” the city to a “repertory company of liars, cheater, and imposters” (132). And now, over the course of Mosley’s Easy Rawlins series, “[t]he very landscape of Los Angeles becomes more emblematic of the evil lurking in the hearts and minds of its citizens” (Muller 292). Thus, the hard-boiled detective, from Marlowe to Rawlins, is alone and cynical in the city—indeed, because of the city—and, ultimately, he discovers that his cynicism has been quite justified all along. Just so, Easy says early on in Black Betty (1994), “There was nobody I could trust” (167), and again near the book’s ending, “You can never trust what somebody tells you is true” (278).

5. Crooks argues similarly that Easy Rawlins’s “individualism” renders him like Sam Spade and Philip Marlowe and also therefore renders all of Mosley’s novels politically suspect, even anti-progressive, because an individualist ethos “remains crucial . . . for disarming collective resistance” (72). See McCann’s Gumshoe America for an extensive analysis of the complex politics, neither wholly reactionary nor wholly progressive, of hard-boiled detective fiction from the 1930s to the 1960s.

6. Mosley has also published a “prequel” (Lock 2) in the series, Gone Fishin’, published in 1997 but set in 1939.

7. As Gilbert Muller aptly notes, “If Watts in particular or Los Angeles more generally is the point of origin in Mosley’s fiction, that demographic point radiates outward to a national boundary or framework that is the province of the novel” (289).

8. Caroline Reitz has made a similar point about Blanche White, Barbara Neely’s protagonist: “Blanche’s detective powers . . . are rooted in the social conditions of her existence” (229).

9. The sameness of political rhetoric in the 2004 Democratic convention is striking. With “hope is on the way” the Kerry–Edwards slogan, it seems that Mosley could write Black Betty yet again. We can only hope that Watts will not suffer again in the ways that it did in 1965 and 1992. And we can only hope that Easy’s comment, “Home is not the place to dream” (Black Betty 31) will not always hold so true for so many.

10. Easy crosses other borders (literal and figurative) as well. Over the course of the rest of the novels, he moves up and down the social and economic ladder, going from poor to working class to middle-class neighborhoods and going from renter to
homeowner to landlord and back. He also marries and divorces and becomes a bi-
ological and an adoptive father.


12. An MLA bibliography search on 1 August 2006 yielded just nine critical arti-
cles on Neely’s Blanche White series but 31 on Mosley’s Easy Rawlins series.

13. A number of studies and newspaper and television stories have documented
this migratory trend. See Max Arax, “In a Reverse Migration, Blacks Head to New
South,” *Los Angeles Times* 24 May 2004 (A1); “African Americans Returning
South,” *NBC Nightly News*, 24 May 2004; “South Attracts More People Than It

14. Recently, when asked about her plans to extend the Blanche White series,
Neely replied that she will continue writing the books, “As long as I have issues
that I want to harangue people about” (Cary). The didactic quality of Neely’s nov-
els also goes some way toward explaining critical and scholarly disregard of the
Blanche White series. Reviewer Kathy Phillips wonders, “Is the mystery a useful
forum for social attack? Presumably the mystery reader is looking for lighter, if not
lightweight, fare, and the Blanche novels no longer provide anything of the sort, if
the first novel arguably did …. While she may be succeeding as a novelist, it is less
likely that she is succeeding as a mystery novelist. One can only wonder if this is
what she intended” (43).

15. This desire, writ large in the Blanche series, also helps explain the books’
popular appeal, along with their relative lack of academic appeal.

16. See Joy James, *Transcending the Talented Tenth* (1997) and Kevin Gaines,
*Uplifting the Race* (1996) for first-rate history and analysis of the term and concept,
the “Talented Tenth.”

17. Easy Rawlins stops short of thoroughgoing feminism—but so, too, I would
argue, does Blanche, despite her strong black woman rhetoric. Blanche claims to
value and to seek connection with African-American women above all others. But
at no point in *Blanche Among the Talented Tenth* or in the series as a whole, does
she form any lasting positive connection with any woman other than her longtime
best girlfriend. Barbara Neely has referred to Blanche as a “behavioral [rather than
an academic] feminist” (Collette), and Blanche undeniably discounts the academic
feminism of Mattie; but Mattie’s written works have had a profound and empower-
ing effect on Tina, the only other potential heroine of the novel. More importantly,
Mattie offers a compelling alternative to bourgeois male-centered models of racial
uplift (such as Du Bois’s) by advancing an academic theory of political and social
change accomplished via women’s “power and ascendancy” (188) and predicated
on unrestricted female sexuality (119, 188–90). By valuing academic as well as
“behavioral” feminism, by remembering the progressivism as well as the elitism in
modern African-American cultural and philosophical paradigms, Blanche may well
have found herself getting closer, faster to the solution of the mystery of who killed
Faith.
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