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Between Afrocentrism and Universality:

Detective Fiction by Black Women

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1. Introduction

Why have we – black women – become the subjected subjects of so much contemporary scholarly investigation, the peasants under glass of intellectual inquiry in the 1990s?

Anne duCille, *Black Womanhood* (1997)

Within commodity culture ... ethnicity becomes spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture.

bell hooks, *Black Looks* (1992)

In the 1990s, black women writers have gradually conquered the sphere of the former white male dominated hard-boiled and classic genres of detective fiction. They have thus entered the mainstream which has been dominated by white Anglo-Saxon culture and therefore they have had to adapt to the specific mechanisms that connect the genre, the market, and the reader.

In general, the 1990s have brought a renaissance to black literature in the United States of America. More and more black writers were published, not only in specialized small presses but increasingly in mainstream publishing houses; black writing also conquered the genres of popular culture, such as science fiction and detective fiction. Black writers and critics, though, express major concern that this mainstream success was only possible at the expense of presenting the “black experience” in recent literature and that the focus of black writers is directed towards universal, marketable texts which satisfy a white readership. It is feared that this weakening of African-American related issues could diminish the black experience of racism which appears to be still existent in its discriminating and humiliating form. Although the black experience should not be reduced to racism – there is as well a rich history of black music, storytelling, or arts -, the perception of race in a white dominated, conservative genre like detective fiction is crucial. If detective fiction is written

and read according to the conventional norms of a return to law and order in a given society then it would consequently mean that racist prejudice is confirmed as well. The white reader's awareness of the problem is then comparable to the experience of a tourist walking on exotic ground. Racism, however, is also a universal issue which occurs in various forms and intensities.

Cornel West in his book *Race Matters* points out the underlying problem of "race" for blacks: "Our truncated public discussions of race suppress the best of who and what we are as a people because they fail to confront the complexity of the issue in a candid and critical manner" (4). He criticizes the fact that blacks are seen by whites as a "problem people" (5), that they are still viewed as a "them" and not the American "we" and that "the burden falls on blacks to do all the 'cultural' and 'moral' work necessary for healthy race relations" (6). It can be argued that black writing and white reading can contribute to the improvement of both these notions.

Black writers, however, not only adopted the mechanisms of a traditional white genre but created on the basis of "reverse discourse" (Walton/Jones 92-94) or rather of "signifying" (Soitos 39) their own tradition of detective fiction. In particular black women writers wrote against the two conservative elements of detective fiction: a male detective and a white detective. Their black female detectives are dynamic characters whose identity is challenged by their race, class, and gender, and all these are negotiated in the mysteries they solve.

On the basis of the two detective series featuring black female detectives these character dynamics will be discussed, particular attention will be paid to the changes and adaptations these characters undergo and how they correspond

to the effects of universality and “black experience”. The purpose of this paper is to show whether or not universality and the “black experience” exclude each other or whether they are rather intertwined elements in a process of an increasing diversification which goes beyond the borders of the black community. This problem, moreover, also affects the role of the reader to the extent of how the detective – the black woman – is perceived and how the reader perceives himself or herself because the reader is exposed to the perspective of the detective’s voice. Since “the detective is the story” (Reddy 35), the text, then, determines whether the black woman remains the “subjected subject” and the “Other”, and whether or not the white reader indeed becomes the cultural tourist or the Other’s “Other”. Reading, then, means also trying to listen to what black women have to say.

The black women – represented as fictional characters - in this paper are Tamara Hayle, a private investigator, created by Valerie Wilson Wesley in the so called hard-boiled tradition of detective fiction; and Blanche White, a domestic worker and amateur sleuth, created by Barbara Neely who leans more toward the classical detective story in the tradition of Miss Marple. Both authors employ different strategies in order to highlight the black experience and to involve the reader in difference and universality. It is their achievement – as it seems to me – that they have provided more insight into the best of being black and have as well established a “we”.

Terminology

Reading and assessing texts from a different culture makes it necessary to be aware of the usage of certain “burdened terms”. In this paper the terms

“African American” and “black” are for the most part used synonymously. According to the *Dictionary of Race and Ethnic Relations* the term African American was revitalized in the late 1980s (13) and appears to be a politically correct term. The word black, then, is according to this dictionary considered the most preferred self-descriptive term because it acknowledges a broader heritage including Haitians, Jamaicans, Nigerians, and others (ibid). It is thus widely used in secondary literature and in this paper employed likewise.

There is also a wide range of overlapping terminology referring to detective fiction. In a wider framework detective fiction corresponds to the rules of popular literature which prescribe a “commercially viable” mode of writing which is “valued on a strictly quantitative basis.” (Holman/Harmon 368) However, its influence on the public cannot be denied since popular literature is able to reach many more readers than canonical works (ibid). The detective novel is often also referred to as a crime novel or a mystery story. The term Mystery Story is usually applied to various types of suspense fiction, such as the detective story, the gothic novel, the espionage story (ibid. 305), and became the brand name for the type of contemporary detective series discussed in this paper (A Tamara Hayle Mystery, A Blanche White Mystery). The detective story, then, usually contains a crime which is solved by a detective “through a logical assembling and interpretation of evidence” (ibid. 132-133). The crime novel is seen as a “derivative of the detective story” in which the emphasis is more on the criminal and on criminal psychology than on the procedures of detection (Cuddon 205-206). For the purpose of this paper, the term detective story is the most applicable; the term mystery is used synonymously.

2. Emergence of New Black Literature

2.1 Tendencies of African-American Literature in the 1990s

“African-American Artists are truly free at last.”

This headline on the cover of *TIME Magazine* from October 10, 1994 refers to a strikingly successful development in the whole spectrum of African-American arts, such as music, literature, dance etc. Its meaning refers, according to Jack E. White’s cover story “The Beauty of Black Art”, to the way African-American art moves towards the mainstream. Black artists “lay claims to the cultural traditions of both blacks and whites” and “increasingly strike themes that are racially and culturally universal” (68). The development in literature is in particular marked by “successful fiction” which “attracts white and black readers” (69).

In the same edition of *TIME Magazine* there is an article by Henry Louis Gates Jr., titled “Black Creativity: On the Cutting Edge”, in which he reflects on the several renaissances black art has experienced during the 20th century. The latest one, however, he considers to be different. The temporary flowerings of black art, ranging from the “New Negro Movement” of 1904 with Pauline Hopkins and W.E.B. DuBois, the “Harlem Renaissance” of the mid 1920s represented by Zora Neale Hurston and Langston Hughes, to the “Black Arts Movement” of the mid 60s and early 70s with Amiri Baraka and Larry Neal as outstanding artists, were all labeled “renaissance” in the sense of the African-American striving for the establishment of their own voice in the culturally white landscape of the United States (74). However, the survival and expansion of those “renaissances” had always depended on white benefaction and thus remained rather short-lived (74).

“Here’s the difference this time around. It’s not that there are black artists and intellectuals who matter; it’s that so many of the artists and intellectuals who matter are black.” (74). Gates sees the beginning of the recent black art boost in the early 1980s when black women, such as Ntozake Shange and Toni Morrison, published literature and criticism which reached the traditional white female middle class reader as well as a new arising black female readership (74-75). Gates connects the reasons for the flourishing of African-American arts to the rise of a black middle class which secured not only a market autonomous of whites but created as well professional positions for blacks, such as agents, editors, producers and owners who have taken charge of art production: “The old ‘black talent – white management’ pattern has finally started to break down.” (75).

Yet this aspiring black middle class is confronted by a dejected black “underclass”; they exist as contrary poles and in the insecurity of the middle class’s still not stable economic prosperity. “The current achievements in black culture are unfolding against this conflicting socio-economic backdrop. Despite remarkable gains, a sense of precariousness haunts the new black middle class and the art it creates and takes to heart.” (75). Against this backdrop, Gates suggests “... that today’s [renaissance] may truly be the renaissance to end all renaissances.” (ibid.), thus expressing the perspective of a permanently independent presence of black art and its constant development.

Gates’ suggestion was taken up by and lively discussed at the National Black Writers Conference (NBWC) in 1996. One of his notions in particular aroused a heated debate: “Discarding the anxieties of a bygone era, these artists presume the universality of the black experience” (ibid.). As a result of the

article from TIME Magazine and Gates' suggestions, some of the conference's participants were afraid that black writers could "... play down the problems of racism and somehow falsify the black experience." (Grimes C 18).

Four years later, at the fifth National Black Writers Conference – with black writing and publishing still flourishing – the question is still present. Besides the obligation of black writers to "be honest about their experiences and to produce at a high standard", the concern about "the shoddy quality of some works by black authors" was expressed in the discussion (Lee 8). This concern refers to a literature which is published because it is easy to sell to a market which "is driven by a white aesthetic that does not differentiate between literature and drive." (ibid.). When comparing the discussions of the two conferences it seems that the controversy about the focus in black writing (mainstream versus black experience) seriously affects the development of African-American literature. "Our foothold in the world of literature is tenuous", Walter Mosley said. "Our own periodicals wait until black writers are lauded by the white press. Too many black writers go to white publishers, who don't hire black editors. We have abrogated our own creativity." (ibid. 1). At this conference, one way out of the problem was offered by Sapphire "You just keep writing,'... 'You write through being marketable, you write through being unmarketable.'" (ibid. 8).

But what are the claims of African-American literature which black writers feel committed to cope with? What exactly is meant by the "black experience"? The answer to both questions is grounded in the historical development of African Americans from slavery to present. In 1922, at the dawn of the Harlem Renaissance, James Weldon Johnson's essay about the nature and function of

black literature states: "... blacks must create literature because it is, inevitably, a fundamental aspect of their larger struggle for civil rights, and it can never escape this role because it serves as prima facie evidence of the Negro's intellectual potential" (Gates/McKay xxxv). The statement still holds truth, considering recent books like the *Bell Curve* by Richard J. Herrnstein and Charles Murray or the feeling that black writers are readily put into boxes and limited to certain genres (Lee 8). Both authors under discussion in this paper, Barbara Neely and Valerie Wilson Wesley, as well as Walter Mosley, to name a male black author, wrote novels outside the genre of the detective novel as if to prove they are able to do better than to serve mere formula fiction. Still, their names are known foremost for their mainstream publications.

Another aspect about the nature and function of black literature can be found in the search for identity, which was expressed as early as in 1903 by W.E.B. DuBois' term of the "double consciousness".¹ Seeing themselves always as the Other and knowing that this picture is incorrect has consequently led to searching for their own self and proving the other's Other wrong. In African-American literature, this identity can be found in the vernacular which comprises forms of folk tradition, such as songs, blues, stories, and language which have been passed on from generation to generation as well as forms that have been added to and mixed with traditions at the time. In short, the vernacular is best explained by Stephen Soitos as the "expressive arts of black

¹ W.E.B. DuBois from *The Souls of Black Souls* quoted in Stephen Soitos' *The Blues Detective*: "... It is a peculiar sensation, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness, - an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder" (33).

Americans that form part of their culture and are derived from the folk tradition” (37).

Thus, the vernacular provides an important source for identity finding and it is used to substantiate the stories in texts by black authors. However, over time the vernacular has been to a greater or lesser extent present in African-American literature because it succumbed to social and political influences and focus shifted accordingly. Race, on the contrary, as a constructed factor in society has always been central in black writing (and in white writing too). The shifting process of the vernacular is expressed by “signifying”, a term which according to Gates means that the repetition of texts by blacks is always a repetition with a difference, a distinctive black difference which is in particular visible in language use (Soitos 39) so that race as a topic also has to undergo specified adaptations.

Most important for the recent development in African-American literature is the realization that “blackness” does not refer to a homogenous background or community of all African Americans despite a shared history of slavery (Christian 2011). This has led to the problem of trying to define exactly what the black experience is and, consequently, which tasks black literature is supposed to fulfill. The awareness of a diverse black community along with the reformist events of the Civil Rights Movement and the feminist movement probably induced the openness and variety of present African-American literature. An increasing separation of a black middle class from a black working class made class a topic of black writing; the white authored history of America has been revised by black writers in order to explain the present; slavery in black literature was not presented as a single topic which is why the

cruelty of slavery was portrayed in light of many individual experiences; with regard to this new awareness of history awareness, influences of African heritage were taken up to enhance a spirituality which referred to an afrocentrist mythology and ancestor worship; writers draw on elements of black culture, such as Black English, jazz, blues and rap music, as well as oral traditions – to name the most important traits which define African-American literature (Christian 2012-2019).

Still, when taken to the extreme, some consider black literature to have failed. Unlike black music, literature has not been able to establish a prevailing black identity since it always has had to cope with receiving acceptance in a white society (Thompson 102). Literature has always been forced to draw on white literary tradition, if only to make itself understood in a foreign world. The experience of slavery, the struggle of an oppressed people for equality and justice appears to be an experience shared by other cultures all over the world and has thus universal character, “yet the Spirituals, the Cakewalk, The Blues, Ragtime music, Gospel music, Black Classical music (Jazz), Rap music, and Black vernacular – among many other unique black cultural productions – give telling evidence of black people making something out of nothing” (ibid. 99). It seems that these achievements, gained in the struggle for recognition and identity in a society based on race, and their interweavement with societal influences represent the black experience.

In light of this, the following goals of contemporary African-American literature appear to preserve the unique elements of the culture created by African Americans, to enhance an African-American identity despite being

depicted as less intelligent and less developed people, and to challenge the norms of the dominant culture.

Since the 1970s, the strong emergence of black women writers has initiated a crucial change in the field of African-American literature which still affects the literary production of today. The black movement and the women's movement preceded and accompanied the development of literature, revealing the interdependence between socio-political changes and changes in literature (Christian 2015). Subsequently, present black writing reflects the trends which shaped the American society in the 1990s. Basically, these trends can be summarized under the keywords demographic change, recession, and pluralism. For the latter, the Länderbericht states: "Pluralism: Größere Akzeptanz von Unterschieden in ethnischen Gruppen und den Lebensstilen." (622). Concerning ethnicity, observers concluded that the more pluralistic attitude of the American people leads toward a diverging society in which the "mosaic" or the "salad bowl" have replaced the former term "melting pot." (ibid. 625). The ethnic groups thus resist assimilation into a rather homogenous American society but insist on the preservation of their individuality. In African-American literature, this concentration on the inner community is presented for example in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*. However, as the discussion of the NBWC showed, the preservation of uniqueness is sometimes sacrificed in order to follow the trend of producing a literature which conforms to the mainstream market. The present dilemma of black writing seems to mirror two major trends in American society: The trend towards multiculturalism corresponds to the urge to express the distinguished black experience whereas the trend towards an all-encompassing entertainment

society² corresponds to the urge to write for a mainstream audience. But these trends cannot be seen as the mere reason for writing in a certain way, they are rather influences which set the cultural framework for writing, publishing, and marketing, and promote the emergence of a certain kind of literature.

Despite more tolerance and a pluralistic attitude, the gap between white and black still persists. African Americans have gained more access to politics, education, and the business sector, such as Colin Powell or Oprah Winfrey. However, this progress must be seen in contrast to the one third of the black population living in poverty (Cashmore 17), the increase in violence against blacks (Rodney King and riots in Los Angeles in 1992), the dispute about affirmative action and residential segregation, and the fact that blacks have a lower average income than whites (Adams/Lösche 642).

In comparison, the situation of black women is similarly contradictory. In general, the women's movement has gained a certain level of political and social equality, even if the nationwide struggle for the Equal Rights Amendment failed in 1982 (ibid. 663). The women's movement of the 1990s concentrated its activities on the local level, on the participation in various local and state organizations for the most part offering professional counseling service (ibid.). Although there is hardly any difference in the level of education between men and women, the filling of leading managerial positions still disadvantages women, and the average income of women is still lower than that of men (ibid. 664). Yet black women, with race as the "main cultural fault line" (Golay/Rollyson 63), virtually have to cope with the affects of a double glass ceiling. In a Gallup poll from 1995 about affirmative action, 71 % of the

² See Neil Postman's book *Amusing Ourselves to Death*.

participating black women considered an increase of affirmative action necessary while just 29 % of the participating white women share this opinion (ibid. 50).

Parallels to these patterns also appear in the literature, ranging from a strong emergence of scholarly and critical writing by black women (Toni Morrison, Barbara Christian) to a candid presentation of the experiences of a poor abused girl in Sapphire's *Push*.

Literature also depends on publishing which is bound to the market which again responds to the three basic changes mentioned above: demographics, economy, and public opinion. With Toni Morrison, Terry McMillan, and Alice Walker together on the New York Times bestseller lists in April 1992 the publishing industry realized the opening of a hitherto neglected gap in the market. Demographics changed for example with respect to the disintegration of the nuclear family. Single women with leisure time represent the vast majority of fiction readers (Campbell 181) who, consequently, like to read about women's issues and were rather attracted by fiction by women authors. The change towards pluralistic attitudes smoothed the way for a greater variety of themes, including minority issues as well as homosexual issues. With the economy in the recession, publishers as well as readers turn to rather inexpensive forms of producing and consuming, thus investing in apparently still secure and promising production and consumption³. Recent black literature has thus approached mainstream, developed a greater crossover appeal, and holds a wider range of genres, such as science fiction with Octavia Butler, Samuel P. Delaney, and recently Walter Mosley, or non-fiction with Cornel

³ See also chapter 2.2.

West, Henry Louis Gates Jr., the self-help genre, and obviously the mystery genre. It seems that African-American literature indeed covers a wide spectrum of themes. However, the NBWC in 1996 complained about the absence of fiction by African-American men which is attributed to a possible refusal of mainstream culture to deal with the image of the black male as either “super athlete/hero” or “threatening presence” (Cook 190).

The major discussion about universality and the black experience comprises also a critique of the absence of classic black fiction, meaning literature read by academics and scholars and found in classrooms and universities (Greene 177). The future task in the development of African-American literature, as was also confirmed at the NBWC in 2000, is to expand an independent black publishing industry and to expand black literary science, including criticism, interpretation, and scholarly writing. (Lee 1).

The question remains as to what universality means in comparison to the black experience. When focusing on mainstream culture which is dominated by whites, universality is equated to white culture and the black experience is reduced to racism. Universality, however, seems to be comprised of more than just white culture; it rather encompasses issues of humanity which can be recognized by people of different races and ethnic backgrounds. One of these issues is the marginal status in which women, black women, white women, most women, and female detectives are united.

2.2 The Rise of Detective Fiction by African-American Women

“Crime novels ought to leave you feeling a little bit angry.” (Décuré 173).

The basic contradiction fueling the debate about African-American literature seems to be inherent in the debate about popular fiction as well. Popular fiction – which detective stories are a part of - is described as formulaic, standardized, designed for a mass audience. Formula fiction has to affirm existing values and attitudes but at the same time has to take up topics which arise from changes in society which affect its readers and which the readers want to see reflected in the texts they buy:

Inevitably the growth in the genre's popularity over the past twenty years has seen a corresponding increase in the number of non-white, unstraight, female crime writers and of course readers – a reflection of changing social patterns and demographics and an acknowledgement of important shifts in the social status of women, gays, lesbians and ethnic minorities (Pepper 32).

So again, the debate is about universality versus uniqueness.

Because popular fiction for the most part seems to provide escapism and entertainment for its readers by emphasizing its elements of excitement and idealism, it has been classified as an inferior type of literature whose purpose and justification as an independent genre has not been acknowledged (Cawelti 13). Detective fiction, in particular, deals with crime which is an integral part of society and detective fiction thus reflects society's basic thoughts about justice, law, and social order. Andrew Pepper states that "these novels deliberately embrace anxieties and discontinuities in order to open up and draw attention to wider social, economic and political tensions in American society as a whole, and force readers into an active, interpretative role, since meanings are not secured or legitimised within texts themselves" (32). This potential of the genre renders common criticism invalid which considered detective fiction

inherently conservative with respect to stereotyping and reaffirming the existing social order, thus reducing the genre to mere commercialization.⁴

More recent criticism, however, acknowledges the contradictory elements in crime fiction, such as the failure of the law, the ambiguities of justice, or the conflicting institution of the detective as an outsider and simultaneously dependent on the dominant social order (Pepper 11-14). Increasingly, critics have paid more attention to the role of the reader: "... meanings, and indeed genres, are not fixed within texts, as most criticism seems to assume, or secured through the interaction of text and critic, but are constantly being made and remade by readers" (ibid. 14). Moreover, readers of formula fiction – in their role as paying consumers - are seen as active participants in the construction of the genre on the level of "active but indirect audience participation" (Walton/Jones 50).

Still there seems to be no consensus on the genre's status, the discussion is rather in a process of re-thinking and re-visioning popular fiction, a process which has been triggered not least because of the huge variety of crime fiction and the emergence of minority writers in particular. This variety in crime fiction reflects the salad bowl model of the American society, allowing multiple coexisting elements (detective novels) to challenge the dominant one (canon).

In the 1990s, detective fiction experienced an overwhelming success; female authors in particular occupied a domain hitherto predominantly belonging to male authors. But the male tradition has not simply been continued. The women, on the contrary, changed and expanded the genre's

⁴ For a comprehensive discussion see Andrew Pepper p. 11 and Walton and Jones, pp. 45-50.

rules, thus initiating their own genre. The strong emergence of female detective fiction cannot be considered coincidental but depends even more than literature production in general on societal and cultural circumstances. The most obvious reason for the strong presence of women writers in this field can be seen in the “...changes in women’s roles and perception of them(selves) and their abilities inaugurated in the 1960s and 1970s” (Walton/Jones 13). Similarly, the emergence of black women writers who feature black female detectives, starting in the 1980s, increased in the 1990s.

In 1988, Dolores Komo’s *Clio Browne: Private Investigator* was published and is considered to be the beginning of an era in African-American literature in which women writers introduce a black female detective (Walton/Jones 24, Pepper 81).⁵ About a decade later there are thirteen series, which feature black women as police detectives, such as Eleanor Taylor Bland, Judith Smith-Levin, Paula Woods, which present black female amateur sleuths, such as Charlotte Carter, Grace Edwards, Penny Micklebury, Barbara Neely, Nikki Baker, Terris Mahon Grimes, Nora deLoach, and which introduce a professional private eye, such as Valerie Wilson Wesley (Reddy 51).

White women and black women – the latter at first to a lesser degree have gradually begun to conquer male dominated jobs and political positions. Since some of them missed this new female presence in their reading, they had to write about it. Barbara Neely, author of the Blanche White series, puts it this way:

I’m my reader: I write the books that I want to read. ...Usually, the politics are over here and the story is over there and the reader is running back and forth between the two. So I decided to just play around with whether or not I could write a book that was political, about race and class

⁵ Komo’s ethnicity is referred to by Soitos as African-American and by Décuré as white; according to Birkle, Komo’s ethnicity remains a mystery (10).

and that was funny. Every time I got stuck on the real book that I was working on, I would pick this other thing up and play with it. So the books really began for myself so that I could read them and I've kept that" (Goeller).

In addition, society prepared the ground for the choice of black women to write in the popular genre and detective fiction in particular. The three basic trends in demographics, economy and public thought can here be applied as well. "In recessionary times genre fiction, and crime fiction in particular, is not just economically stable but expands significantly, perhaps because the pleasure of formula fiction is a 'sure bet' economically – the reader's financial investment is based on predictable rewards in entertainment value" (Walton/Jones 26). The readership, then, is known to be comprised predominantly of women, and this fact again is reflected in the presence of the many female protagonists - more proof of the readers' participation in the production of formula fiction.

Similarly, pluralism is echoed in the enormous variety of detective characters as well as story topics which is also visible among black women authors: Nikki Baker features a lesbian amateur detective who is a financial consultant; Terris McMahan's detective is a personnel officer. The detectives' lives and work force them to confront race tension, domestic violence, community, class issues. It is however striking that this strong emergence of detective fiction happened at a time when statistics showed a decline in homicide and murder rates (Golay/Rollyson 90), an increase in the percentage of people who rated crime as the most pressing problem facing the United States (ibid. 91), and an increase in racist violence and in the rate of imprisoned male African Americans (ibid.).

The close connection between social trends and genre fiction suggests that such literature has a strong realistic appeal. But literature and formula fiction in particular are at most to be seen as reflections of reality, they are rather “social and aesthetic constructs” (Walton/Jones 62), whose sole purpose is to satisfy the specific needs of the reader. With regard to detective fiction, the purpose of reading seems to be primarily the escape into the enjoyment of suspense and enigmatic mystery. Special social and political issues inserted in the formula thus do not have the appeal of reality, but the genre’s conventions allow an unthreatening practice of such issues (Cawelti 42). This practice, as Walton and Jones present it for feminism (60-62), can as well be comprised of almost any socio-political issues, such as racism in African-American detective novels.

The conventions of the genre itself offered the potential for ethnic and thus African-American crime fiction. A detective story consists of a crime, its investigation by a detective, and a dénouement. The detective as the protagonist has to be a carefully designed figure who adheres to a particular stereotype. The traditional detective had to be an eccentric outsider, a solitary figure in respect to ordinary life, such as marriage, religion, and community (Soitos 24). Thus it is a genre in which “...a marginal figure lay claim to the narrative’s central perspective” (Walton/Jones 40). By taking possession of the detective character, people at the margin of society like women and ethnic minorities were able to move their voice from margin to center. Furthermore, the voice of at least the hard-boiled detective was the “I”, which told the story exclusively from the detective’s perspective, bringing thus any issues raised close to the reader. Another attribute of the detective, which is a necessity for

investigating, is his/her ability to take on different identities, to disguise and to mask - a concept of duality developed by Edgar Allan Poe and applied to black detectives by Stephen Soitos: "Black detectives use their own blackness to mask their true identities as detectives, connecting the trope of double consciousness to the trickster tradition." (18).

Furthermore, the formulaic text structure has a great crossover potential and the texts are designed to meet the expectations of a broad audience so that there is a chance for minority writers to reach more readers. One reason for the popularity of detective fiction by black women is seen in "their ability to 'speak in tongues': to connect intimately with a vast audience on multiple levels, speaking to white women as women, black men as blacks, and black women as black women" (Reddy 56).

It seems that not much attention has been paid to the stories which have to adhere to the conventions of crime, investigation, and denouement. However, these subplots offer the chance to address social issues by outlining the criminal's motivation, or by describing the detective's, the victim's or the criminal's life as will be discussed in chapter 3 and 4.

Black women writers made use of these potentials and created a distinctive type of detective fiction. This distinctiveness is basically visible in the four components of black male and female detective fiction as presented by Stephen Soitos: detective persona who is black and attached to his/her community, double-consciousness detection which refers to disguise because of the double nature of black identity, the use of vernaculars, and the presence of hoodoo as part of the black vernacular tradition (Soitos 28-51). Concerning the difference between detective fiction by white women and black women, Nicole Décuré

isolated two major features: the protagonist's personal relationships with family, friends, and men, and the protagonist's relationship with blacks and whites (162) which will be discussed in chapter 3. The black female detective is not the lonely hero, besides detecting she leads an intense life within her family and usually black community. The relationships between blacks and whites are presented differently by several authors: from almost total neglect in Nora deLoach's books to an utmost complexity in Nikki Baker's novels (169-177).

Thus, race is an important issue which is presented in the works of black women authors and is in particular related to black and white relationships and expresses a part of the intensity of the black experience. Black women authors then altered the male tradition of detective fiction as well as the recent white female detective genre which is visible in the expression of their "black female consciousness", their connectedness to the black community, their roles as mothers, their questioning of law and justice, their instruction on gender and race issues, and the "race-based invisibility/hypervisibility theme" (Reddy 76-78).

3. Heroes of a Different Kind?

3.1 Character Concepts

Heroes in literary fiction are never to be seen as real persons, they are constructions, they move a story, and they are often bound to images and patterns. Particularly the heroes of genre fiction seem to be bound to the patterns which were mentioned in the previous chapter. Images are socially and culturally constructed pictures and depictions. Black women in particular seem

to have been marked by stereotypes and images. Mammy, Aunt Jemima, Jezebel, Welfare Queen, tragic Mulatta, and Sapphire are images of black women in the United States. Constructed mainly for reasons of continued oppression and exploitation, these images “became ingrained in the American psyche” and have not disappeared after the Civil Rights Movement but rather have been rearranged (Young 41). Moreover, these images have been accepted by blacks as well, for the most part because these images nevertheless entail a notion of strength, of enduring and relying on oneself: “Historically, African American women have been viewed as balm bearers ... They were towers of strength against the degradation of slavery. ... They were towers of strength in taking care of their families, usually through domestic work ... Unquestionably, strength was frequently the only virtue available to black women” (Harris 9, 11). The Mammy image in particular grew out of an erroneously positive notion and implied the imagination of matriarchy. The power of these images appears to be so strong that even black writers have implemented them. While attempting to disprove these images, black writers have focused on the notions of strength inherent in these images but have neglected to address the problems this strength creates for their characters. Trudier Harris argues: “Conceptualization of black female character, therefore, has fallen into the creative trap or paradox of finding a way out of traditional stereotypes by reinvigorating an old one ...” (10), representing a type of strength in their characters that renders them to rather suprahuman beings (11).

The type of strength, which Harris criticizes, is apparent in a character’s suprahumanity, introspection, taciturnity, and myth. These characters are never challenged, they do not experience failure or leisured existences; their

complexity including femininity, tenderness, and humanity is neglected (11-13), moreover, their strength becomes so dominant that they oppress others, that “their strength has crippled black men” (13). This portrait of the strong black woman became common in African-American literature and Harris strongly misses black female characters “who are self-sufficient without diminishing anyone else, who are secure in their own identities, who are sexual and spiritual beings who appear to continue to live in this world instead of escaping into immortality or purgatory” and wonders if popular fictions might be able to provide these characters (177).

It seems contradictory that Harris should consider the criteria for a secure identity to be a necessary trait of a healthy, strong black woman since she seems to criticize this trait of dominating, strong women characters. Harris attributes a character’s insecure personality, such as Celie’s in Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*, to mere victimization (176); however, it is this process of searching and finding a secure identity, which appears to be a feature of the healthy, strong woman because her identity is continuously challenged by influences from her environment and she has to negotiate her positions again and again. It can be observed that female characters in African-American literature experience a kind of quest, a search which helps them form a new identity or complete their identity and which also includes the possibility of failure, such as in the case of Precious in Sapphire’s novel *Push* who begins a new life and finds a little bit of happiness, or the women in Toni Morrison’s *Paradise* who eventually find their identity in the small community of their convent but do not have the chance to let their newly found strength become reality.

In women's detective fiction, however, the female protagonist has to be strong because as the detective she is in control of the investigation and thus of the story and to a certain extent of the narrative. A comparison between the contemporary black female detective and the black woman protagonist from non-genre fiction appears to be possible because these new detectives have a personal life when they are not sleuthing: they are mothers, they have professions, they are embedded in their communities, they have heterosexual or lesbian relationships, and they are confronted with a lot of social problems.

It can be observed that many of the female characters in African-American literature experience a quest which affects their identity. This quest makes them different from those strong women who use their strength to oppress others. In detective fiction, then, a similar quest or search can be found which the protagonist experiences throughout the several books of the series.

Black women have to be strong. Detectives have to be strong. The following analysis of Barbara Neely's and Valerie Wilson Wesley's heroes revolves around both these notions and explores what makes them African-American women, detectives and strong.

3.2 Characters and Stories

The two series, also referred to as the Tamara Hayle Mysteries and the Blanche White Mysteries, belong basically to the same genre and employ similar genre expanding strategies. Nevertheless, they differ considerably from each other. The former follows the hard-boiled tradition whereas the latter adheres to the classic detective novel, a distinction which affects the outline of the characters: Tamara is the professional private investigator; Blanche the

amateur sleuth. In so far, the motivation for detecting is obviously different too: Tamara has to earn money; Blanche must be very curious and attentive by nature but still needs another strong reason to expose herself to danger.

First Meeting with Tamara and Blanche

About herself Tamara says: “There are three things in this life I cherish: my independence, my son, Jamal, and my peace of mind” (*Death* 6). In the first Tamara Hayle Mystery, *When Death Comes Stealing*, Valerie Wilson Wesley introduces her hero in the setting of Tamara’s home and family relations. “‘Is that you, Tamara?’ the voice on the phone asked” (1). The caller is immediately identified as Tamara’s ex-husband DeWayne, Tamara is presented as a divorced single mother, raising a teenage son. Soon the reader is confronted with the core of a detective novel: the crime. Tamara learns about the death of another son of her ex-husband and his urgent request to talk to her. While waiting for DeWayne, Tamara reflects in an extra paragraph about her past and present life so that the reader can draw a first picture of her. This small section in the first chapter presents the basic facts of the hero’s life which will be part of each of the following books and which will also determine Tamara’s conduct. She quit her job as a cop: “Some might say I couldn’t handle the shit I was supposed to put up with – being black, being a woman – and I guess that’s about right. I knew who I was and I wouldn’t let them change it” (6). Therefore, she decided to start her own private investigation service. She is in her thirties, “too old to put up with anything or anybody that breaks my day” (7) and lives with the memory of her dead brother Johnny.

In the course of the first chapter DeWayne convinces Tamara of his disbelief in his son's drug death, and Tamara, who usually investigates "men ... cheating on their women" (14), runaways or similar cases, agrees to at least check out the place of the deceased's home in order to find out one way or the other if foul play was involved. Because of her problems with DeWayne in the past she hesitates to accept the job. But the reason why she decides to help seems quite obvious to the reader - she needs the money. The need of money is always her primary reason to accept a job although Wesley - in this as well as in others of the books - added a more personal aspect to Tamara by making her accept the job as well because of her son Jamal's silent request and her own closeness to the dead boy.

With Barbara Neely's hero Blanche the reader meets "a black woman trying to control her own life and stand firm against having her brain vanillaed" (*Lam* 215). In *Blanche on the Lam*, the first book of the series, the reader meets Blanche in a court room in front of a judge facing thirty days in jail because of an alleged fourth bad check charge. So, assuming that the reader expects to read a detective novel, he encounters the supposed detective Blanche as a supposed/ostensible criminal. In the following books of the series, Blanche appears again and again as the detective, the "criminal", and the victim. She has to maneuver between these positions and the weakness and power they provide. By combining the roles of the detective and the criminal, Neely raises from the very beginning the issue of an incompetent judicial system and presents the sense of justice and its execution in the American society.

On the second page the reader learns that Blanche is black, deep black: "The matron's hand was pale as plaster against the deep blackness of Blanche's

upper arm” (2). By naming her hero Blanche White, Neely focuses the readers attention on color and thus race matters which she presents with satirical and linguistically attentive expressions, such as “having her brain vanillaed” and “whitemale” instead of blackmail; she also effectively presents the perspective of a black woman in a genre otherwise dominated by a white point of view. The issue of describing blackness as beautiful is handled with a special importance by the author in all of the books of the series.

In the next part of the first chapter Blanche’s social status as a domestic worker is an indication that social class becomes a further topic of the series. Blanche’s status as a member of the working class seems to be unique in the mostly middle class landscape present in other detective novels in current detective fiction. This phenomenon is for the most part due to the genre’s conventions of having a middle class readership and crimes which usually happen in middle and upper class areas. Blanche’s status is thus not quite without bias, as will be referred to in chapter 3.2.

Feeling unjustly sentenced, Blanche uses her opportunity while in the bathroom to escape from the courthouse. She is fearful of attracting too much attention to herself and worries about her family which is introduced in the last part of the opening chapter: her dictating Mama, her dead sister’s two children who she took responsibility for, and her friend Ardell. Thus Neely shows the complexity of Blanche’s relationships which help to define black women detectives.

After this first impression of Blanche the reader is made aware of the underlying idea of her character which Barbary Neely describes as follows:

I knew that I was going to be playing with this thing about race, class and gender. ... I wanted the world view and the inner life of a poor

working class woman, ... When I lived in North Carolina ... I met a woman whose name was Blanche. And the Blanche in the books looks pretty much like her. ... we need a heroine who looks like this woman; these are not the women who ever get to star in anything (Goeller).

In this sense, Blanche appears as an average black woman: middle-aged, living in the South, working in the service sector, unmarried, single mother, attached to a neighborhood community. Since she corresponds to the statistics⁶, she has a realistic appeal for readers.

Whereas Tamara already in the first pages of Valerie Wilson Wesley's novel *When Death Comes Stealing* is identified as a detective, Blanche at first finds a short-termed shelter in the workplace of a new and almost accidentally acquired employer and there she stumbles over some peculiarities which lead Blanche into detecting.

The Detectives

Since Tamara can be considered the detective of the hardboiled genre and Blanche the amateur detective of the classical genre, they have distinctive features, such as their motivation for investigating a crime, the way they conduct their investigation, and the way they describe violence. Whereas the conventional detective stories of both traditions put the main emphasis on the development of the plot, contemporary detective fiction focuses on the development of the character (Molander 175). The introduction of a female detective made this change necessary because a mere replacement of the male detective by a female proved to be unrealistic since the male based worldview dominates the genre structures. Even more alterations had to be made by black female authors of detective fiction, therefore Soitos considers the black

⁶ See census statistics from 1996 at www.census.gov/population/.

detective “a curious amalgam” of the hardboiled and the classical detective hero (24).

Thus, Blanche and Tamara are “Blues Detectives”. Soitos in his homonymous book presents four helpful characteristics (tropes) of black detective fiction which demonstrate the alterations of the genre conventions made by black writers and constitute the African American uniqueness of this particular fiction: Detective Persona, Double Consciousness, Black Vernaculars, and Hoodoo (3). The alterations are based on the “vernacular”, meaning in Soitos’ sense “an all-inclusive term covering a range of black expressive arts in the folk tradition” (27). All four tropes pervade African American mystery novels, their “interconnection” gives black detective fiction distinctiveness which even pilots an own black detective tradition (28). A closer look at the four tropes shows indeed that they can hardly be considered as single factors, in fact, their interdependence appears to be so strong that if one of them was left out it could diminish the presentation of African-American identity as a whole: Since the detective persona in these novels is black, the behavior of the detectives is definitely influenced by the ever-present double consciousness and it is as well influenced by the traditionally developed vernacular of which hoodoo again is an expression of a specific religion and worldview. It can even be argued that the intensity of the four tropes in black detective novels determines the trend towards either an African-American view or a universal experience.

The gist of the four tropes appears to be the detective persona whose blackness is an “integral ingredient for the success of the investigation”, whose detection is directly connected to community, and who consistently expresses

an African-American worldview (29-33). Here it seems to me that in the case of female black detectives it must be added that they express the female perspective of the African-American worldview. For both heroes, Blanche as well as Tamara, their blackness and their awareness thereof is actually the reason and even motivation for sleuthing. Tamara left her job as a cop because she had been labeled a “nigger bitch” (*Devil’s* 6) by her colleagues and her son became a victim of white police men who abused their power. After quitting the force, founding her own agency was the next logical step for her. As a private investigator she could make use of the skills she learned as a cop.

Blanche, on the contrary, conscious of being Night Girl, an image that projects her blackness as an advantage, was driven early into snooping because she felt protected by her “invisibility” (*Lam* 59-60). Blanche’s awareness of being a black person actually motivates her to seek the truth either on her own behalf or for the benefit of the members of her community. In *Blanche on the Lam*, it is the murder of Blanche’s white employer’s gardener, Nate, who knew too much, which enrages her and kindles her desire for justice and revenge: “A thick, hot rage began to roil in her stomach at the thought of the deaths of all the poor black Nates and, yes, Blanches at the hands of the privileged white Everetts of the world.” (148-149). In *Blanche Cleans Up* she feels committed to find out the truth about the death of a young black man who is the son of a friend of hers and who became involved in the blackmailing of a white politician. In *Blanche Among the Talented Tenth* it is her sympathy for Mattie, a famous black feminist, that causes her to find out the truth about Mattie’s protégés’ suicide. In Neely’s last novel, *Blanche Passes Go*, Blanche finally seeks revenge on the white man who had raped her many years ago.

Blanche's and Tamara's blackness is not only a reason for their detecting but it also becomes a decisive factor in throwing light on hidden truths. Tamara, in Wesley's first novel *When Death Comes Stealing*, checks the apartment of her ex-husband's dead son. Where the police had neglected evidence and discarded the case as just the death of another black junkie, Tamara found signs in the apartment which proved to her that someone other than junkie had lived there. Disturbed by the fact that the police are so lax when investigating crimes involving black male victims she is convinced that this boy has been murdered and decides to take the case. In *No Hiding Place* she decides to investigate a murder because she feels it is her responsibility not only to her client but also to the murdered boy; and because the police did not put much effort into what seemed to them like a case of "Niggers killing niggers" (16). It is then her blackness and thus her access to the black community which contributes to a successful investigation. Here, Wesley expresses her critique of the legal system in the United States, but not to the extent that Neely does when she describes the apparent powerlessness of Blanche, who can only negotiate with the criminals themselves or those who are affected by the crimes. Tamara appears rather to be a kind of savior, who is able to negotiate with the system. Because of her familiarity with the system, she and her lawyer friend Jake turn a teenage murderer over to the police in hopes that his deed, which was the result of his desperate social situation, will be judged moderately.

Though her blackness enables her to find evidence otherwise ignored by white arrogance, Tamara remains tied to the legal system in which justice seems possible in the end. It is Tamara who in the end confronts the murderer.

With only the help of her wits and intelligence rather than weapons Tamara is able to overpower the criminals who usually end up being killed or being turned over to the police. In *When Death Comes Stealing*, Tamara must kill July in order to prevent her from shooting Jamal who is the last of Tamara's ex-husband's sons and the last one July wants to kill in order to get her revenge. The police had been informed by Tamara about the identity of the murderer and finally come to rescue. In *Devil's Gonna Get Him*, the reader learns in the epilogue that the murderer is in prison; in *No Hiding Place*, Tamara unmask a whole family which conspired to commit the murder, forcing one family member who is close to her to report the crime to the police.

Although Blanche's blackness contributes as well to the success of the investigation, she does not see the chance for justice within the system. In *Blanche Cleans Up*, Neely presents the idea of blacks taking the law into their own hands, thus introducing a "Robin Hood" idea for the black inner city of the 90s. Here it is a group of ex-convicts who help Blanche unmask the murderer. Their practice of giving 110% means that they also execute the sentence they impose on the criminal. In all of the books, Blanche does not hope for help or a fair deal from the justice system when it comes to finally tracking down and prosecuting of the suspect. In *Blanche on the Lam* she negotiates with her employer's lawyer about the murderer's punishment and her reward; in *Blanche Among the Talented Tenth* the culprit passes judgment on himself after Blanche confronts him with his crime; in *Blanche Cleans Up* she tracks the murderer down with the help of a secretive group of security men consisting of black ex-convicts; in *Blanche Passes Go* she gets caught up in her role as the persecutor of the white man who raped her.

Apparently, how justice is served differs in the two series which can be explained by the difference in class. Whereas a black middle class despite distrusting the police seems to expect justice through the final enactment of the law, the black working class does not seem to have any faith in the law. Both heroes trust their sense of right and wrong. Evelyne Keitel states that the detectives in recent crime fiction form their own opinion about crime and criminals, working with the motif of a “justified murder” with the consequence being: “Dadurch wird das mit der Gattung eng verbundene Motiv der Strafe und Sühne problematisch.” (Keitel 59). The main problem with the motif of punishment and atonement is the consideration of the principles of justice which are influenced by the circumstances of the crime and common sense.⁷ In both series, the culprit never escapes some form of justice, be it the subjugation under the legal system or the intervention of a higher power. Here, one of the genre constraints, namely the re-establishment of law and order, creates an obstruction which cannot be overcome but only be opened wide enough for one to be able to recognize the shortcomings of the law. Blackness, however, contributes definitely to making one aware of many of these shortcomings.

It is then not only blackness but Blanche’s and Tamara’s consciousness thereof that contributes to the presentation of the black experience. One important aspect of blackness that contributes to the investigation and the revelation of societal deficiencies is double consciousness, a term coined by W.E.B. DuBois in 1903 which is still valid: Black people are always seeing themselves through the eyes of the other. While being aware of their images, they use them to reveal hidden truths. With regard to detective novels, Soitos

⁷ Consider Linda Hogan’s detective novel *Mean Spirit* in which the question of who is guilty of the murders is rendered unimportant, and a solution according to Western law cannot be found (Linton 25).

calls double consciousness the masking or the trickster fashion (33). Both blues detectives, Blanche and Tamara, use their assumed invisibility to inconspicuously gain access to places and become involved in situations otherwise inaccessible to them. Blanche's presence as the black maid is all too easily forgotten, the dullness of the black servant is taken for granted, she is rather considered to be a piece of furniture. At the same time, her tasks in the household give her an excuse to linger around and overhear conversations and even to manipulate events. Moreover, she is fully aware of her images and uses her masks to baffle and bluff:

'Oh, Lord!' Blanche lifted her apron to her face as she'd seen Butterfly McQueen do in *Gone With the Wind*. If the subject had been anything other than Nate's death, she'd have had a hard time keeping a straight face. It was the kind of put-on that gave her particular pleasure. But now she only wanted to appear convincingly simple. She rubbed her eyes to moisten and redden them, and raised her head to regard her enemy's helpmate (*Lam* 153-154).

Similarly, Tamara attributes to herself:

It's easy to follow somebody who doesn't know you from nothing, especially if you're black and a woman. The world takes you for granted then, and you're always somebody's something else – sister-lady ringing up the groceries or sweeping up the floor. I do my best work when people are limited by their own expectations. I smile a lot. Flash my toothiest grin. I've even been known to bend my head slightly and nod a bit to the left. A pleasant young Negress. A dependable, unassuming presence. And while I'm doing my act, I can follow some all-assuming fool to the ends of the earth, making all the notes I please. I love it when they realize that all the while I was bowing and scraping I was steadily kicking ass. (*Devil's* 27-28).

Both use their "invisibility" while investigating mysteries but at the same time they also speak to white readers by telling them that whites still have not developed the will or the ability to really see and hear black people.⁸

⁸ See also chapter 4.

Both characters correspond to Soitos' trope of the detective persona (28) and its feature which enables them to connect with their communities. Neither of them is the typical loner of the hardboiled tradition or the all-knowing sleuth of the classical tradition. Although both rely on their own strength, they often depend on friends, families, neighbors, and allies for help in solving a mystery or just getting comfort and mental support. In *Blanche on the Lam*, Blanche – while being confined to the country house of her white employers – has her mother, her friend Ardell, and Miz Minnie take responsibility for her family and find out information about her employers. Tamara often asks her lawyer friend Jake for advice and gathers information for her investigations from the latest gossip in Wyvetta's beauty parlor.

The community setting is an important part of both novels because by identifying with their communities Blanche and Tamara gain a sense of responsibility for their neighbors. In *Blanche Cleans Up*, the impact of lead poisoning as well as the murder of Miz Barker, whose little store was also a place to get advice, affects the whole community. In *Devil's Gonna Get Him* Tamara helps Wyvetta's sister Tasha who becomes the prime suspect in the murder. The sense of community then is integrated into a closely knit setting with the effect that both, the trend toward regionalism and the trend toward an opening of culturally divergent spaces, is made possible. Keitel sees in this phenomenon the function of detective stories as "Verständigungstexte" which communicate strategies to solve every day problems (99). Therefore, the reader is not only offered a view into a foreign culture but also recognizes problems similar to his/her own which thus shows the universal appeal of black female detective fiction.

Setting – including community and other facets of the black vernacular – does not work unequivocal towards the presentation of the black experience, however, it is as a part of the “blackground” (Soitos 37), which includes references to music, food, hair style, or famous black personalities, definitely a means to express the unique features of black culture. However, religion could be regarded as a part of setting which proves to be less communicable.

Hoodoo⁹ is the fourth trope which is considered a distinctive feature of black detective fiction. According to Soitos, hoodoo is an essential part of black folk tradition, it is of African origin and developed from different African sources as well as from Christian religion. Hoodoo came with the slaves sold from Haiti to the North American continent (Soitos 44). Hoodoo is for the most part known and regarded as witchcraft, superstition, and fetishism. Soitos, however, emphasizes its cultural and philosophical value for a black cultural identity: “Hoodoo encompasses important oral traditions, religious practices, and performance spectacles that are integral aspects of black cultural identity” (ibid.). He further does not want to see hoodoo as a mere religion but rather as an alternative worldview of black Americans with components, such as “belief in ancestralism, belief in higher life force, and the concept of full ontological being, which can include aspects of divination, animism, and spiritual awareness through magic and conjure” (47). It is this special worldview that most noticeably marks black detective fiction as distinct from mainstream white detective fiction: “The inclusion of African American worldviews in detective fiction shows blacks searching for a positive, open-ended system of self-definition and awareness. These worldviews are posited

⁹ The word is a negatively interpreted US-version of voodoo (Soitos 42).

against the negative, closed, oppressive system of white-dominated worldviews in the typical detective novel.” (49).

In order to develop an understanding of this worldview, one could employ the concept of intuition in the sense of deducing without obvious rational explanation. Intuition has been considered a strikingly distinctive characteristic of the detective fiction by white women authors. Female detectives deduce more by intuition than by the typical ratiocination that their male colleagues are proud of. Female detection emphasizes the importance of making “conscious use of the unconscious” when investigating (Keitel 61-63). Intuition is as well a means of detecting and also a way of surviving that both Blanche White and Tamara Hayle utilize; still, their intuition seems to be anchored in a deeper understanding and appears in various facets. Intuition is inherent in Tamara’s instincts: “I’ve always had a survival instinct that snaps into place even when I don’t know I’m in danger.” (*Evil* 34), an instinct that she uses to evaluate people: “From the first time I’d seen him, I’d sensed the despair that emanated from him; he had the smell of defeat” (*Easier* 245). However, simple intuition is expanded then and tied to the realm of ancestor worship. Tamara, when facing the evil threatening her life, was “praying to every ancestor I’d ever heard of to get me through this” (*Evil* 201) She reflects on her dead grandmother who raised her more than her mother. “My grandma had put a face on evil when we were kids. It was always perched and ready like a haint to catch you, eager to tempt and embrace you if you let it, always anxious to make a play for your soul. She preached about evil when she polished my Sunday shoes on Saturday night and burned candles to protect us from it” (*ibid.* 31-32). Her grandmother embodies the power which ancient and non-western

cultures ascribe to the oral tradition. Native Americans in particular understood the spoken word not only as a story but a reality that comes to take place.¹⁰ Tamara remembered: “My grandmother used to tell me that to call a feeling by its name will give it life. ‘If you call it by its name, you have to reckon with it,’ she’d warn us in her often illogical but loving attempt to protect us from some evil thing she feared would harm us” (*Easier* 26). Beside her grandmother, the spirit of Tamara’s dead brother Johnny is ever present in her life, he is somebody she refers to as an idol for her and others from her community, somebody she asks for advice, and who in *No Hiding Place* is the reason for her detecting and moreover, the reason to connect again with her past in black working class Newark.

Blanche expresses her spirituality even stronger. Her religion is very important to her. In *Blanche Among the Talented Tenth* she undertakes a journey to the sea to find out which direction her life might take in the future as Madame Rosa had recommended her to do: “‘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 your leave that place....’” (13). Blanche’s spirituality grew out of “her need to be connected to something that was larger than the world as she knew it.” (60). Feeling uncomfortable with Christianity as the religion of the slave holders, Blanche turned to “a kind of haphazard spirituality” (60) which included having read her cards and consulting a Yoruba priestess but also drawing from African, Caribbean, Native American, and Asian spiritual beliefs in the connection between human beings and nature (*Passes Go* 12). Eventually, she felt the need for a solid religious life and

¹⁰ Consider for example the “invention” of white people in Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Ceremony*.

decided to create her own religion by turning her practice of talking to her dead grandmothers into ancestor worship: “She began collecting pictures of all her dead relatives and built an altar for them – and up-ended wooden crate she sanded and shellacked and covered with Grandmama Robinsons’s crochet work. ... Every morning, she lit the candles and incense and talked to her ancestors about her problems and dreams, her wishes for her children, her hopes.” (61)

In addition, Blanche’s spirituality expresses those features of hoodoo which are usually disdained by whites and black middle-class Americans and considered to be acts of witchcraft: She can sense the nearness of a close friend or relative before they have revealed their presence – even if they call her on the phone; she can sense the auras of the houses where she works at or lives in because “There could be no harder task than working in a house that didn’t like you” (*Lam* 35). In *Blanche Cleans Up*, the ghost of the murdered Ray Ray haunts her and inspires her thoughts about the case. When teaching an arrogant white teenage boy to respect her, “Blanche hissed some broken Swahili and Yoruba phrases she’d picked up at the Freedom Library in Harlem and told the boy it was a curse that would render his penis as slim and sticky as a lizard’s tongue” (*Lam* 38). But Barbara Neely does not intend to present Blanche as a supernatural being. In the end of her ritual at the sea resort in *Blanche Among the Talented Tenth*, Blanche is disappointed since the connections she anticipated she would make as prophesied by Madame Rosa did not turn out as expected and Blanche has doubts as to whether or not she understood Madame Rosa correctly. At the end of *Blanche Passes Go*, she also questions her interpretation of the outcome of her prayers to the ancestors as she becomes

consumed by her desire for her revenge. By revealing the insecure, sometimes illusory and deceptive character of spiritual oracles, Neely makes clear that religious practice is important in life for finding one's roots and connecting to the greater world in spirit and nature but at the same time it should not be mistaken as a substitute for reality.

Nevertheless, Blanche's expressions of hoodoo can also be found in other contemporary and previous black literature: Ishmael Reed refers to hoodoo in several of his works, such as in the novel *Mumbo Jumbo* which features a black detective with spiritual abilities (Soitos 32) or in his poem *Railroad Bill, a Conjure Man*: "Railroad Bill was a gris-gris man / He could change himself to a mask / A Ziba, a Zulu / A Zambia mask. A Zaramo / Doll as well / One with a necklace on it / A Zaramo doll made of wood" (from: *Norton Anthology* 2290), Paule Marshall has her heroine experience a purifying ceremony of dancing and singing and worshipping the ancestors of ancient tribes on a small Caribbean Island.

Tamara and Blanche can thus be characterized as Blues Detectives who indeed express their African-American distinctiveness. Neely's presentation of the black experience seems to be more intense and direct because of two main alterations she made: introducing a working class sleuth, and putting less emphasis on the crime and more focus on Blanche's life story and the stories which accompany the investigation. Wesley's novels provide a subtler presentation of the black experience. Tamara, nevertheless, expresses critique on social issues which is according to her commitment to the hardboiled tradition conveyed by the story rather than the character. Both protagonists, however, do not correspond to the traditional stereotypical detective figure, and

the real effect of their characters unfolds only when they are considered as women.

The Black Woman

“I don’t even think of her as an amateur sleuth, I think of her as an everyday black woman who deals with whatever problems life presents ...” (Goeller) – Barbara Neely puts the focus on Blanche as a woman. From the first to the so far last book Blanche undergoes changes as a woman but not as a detective.

This nature of her character prevents Blanche from becoming stereotypical; moreover, as Andrew Pepper puts it “Blanche’s identity is never fixed” (85). Blanche thus does not seem to correspond to the detective genre or to any image mentioned before. Blanche’s large size, her concern for others, her cooking and comforting implies at first a picture of Aunt Jemima or Mammy. But Blanche does not correspond to this image. Barbara Neely gave her distinctive qualities which makes her – as Neely herself put it – an “antidote to Aunt Jemima” (Goeller). First of all, Blanche is not submissive and passive but rather self-confident and proud of who she is and in what she does. When she was called “Ink Spot“ and “Tar Baby“ by her peers, Cousin Murphy helped her to become “Night Girl“: “People what got night in ‘em can step into the dark and poof – disappear! Go any old where they want. Do anything. Ride them stars up there, like as not.” (*Lam* 59). The compelling power of the Night Girl image which makes Blanche aware of her uniqueness and powerfulness is imaginatively designed by Neely and serves her commitment to give black women a feeling of pride and beauty about themselves.

Blanche's status as a domestic worker is another misleading stereotype. Frankie Bailey noted "As a domestic Blanche is descended from that long line of black women who have labored outside their homes to support their families" (192). By making Blanche a domestic worker, Barbara Neely presents a possible reality of an average black woman's life. Black women's domestic work started with slavery and continued through the years up until the present; Blanche can thus be considered a link between the present and the past. Domestic work seemed to be the only available work for black women until the 1970s; statistics show that as recent as in 1940 almost 60 percent of all employed black women were domestic workers (ibid.). This fact was also referred to in Sapphire's novel *Push* in which the hero Precious, an abused teenage girl of the so-called black underclass, is recommended to become a home attendant instead of pursuing a longer education (121). Blanche, however, differs from those women who were forced to accept domestic work as a way of making a living. She chose to be a domestic worker instead of following her mother's urging to become a nurse or "some other mother-proud professional" (Lam 19). While stressing Blanche's freedom to choose, Neely acknowledges the more various job opportunities now available to black women. Although Blanche complains about her work, she cherishes her freedom to choose her employer and to organize her workday. Thus, Blanche almost appears to be self-employed which is a contradiction in terms. This is mostly due to the character's integration into the detective genre. The crime in traditional detective fiction usually takes place within middle and upper class circles and therefore working class issues are seldom addressed.¹¹ A working-

¹¹ Nicole Décurè writes that "Working-class literature seems to be a contradiction in terms." (160) and refers to the genre conventions of crime fiction. However, here a differentiation must

class amateur sleuth would hardly have time to conduct an investigation or gain access to the information necessary to solve a crime; a private investigator cannot be considered working class.

Blanche's identity is thus renegotiated again and again and not only in respect to class. She slips into the role of the detective when her sense of justice is challenged; in the eyes of her white employers she's only Aunt Jemima but in secret she is really a "resistance fighter" (Bailey 192) who mocks them; she is the poor domestic worker who is looked down upon or the "behavioral feminist" who acts instead of theorizing; she is the eggplant black, oversized woman and the beautifully natural Night Girl; she chose herself not to become a mother, still she decided to raise her dead sister's children. These differences in how she perceives herself and is perceived by others help form a major part of the stories' plot which ties into her underlying quest - the search for her true identity that can be similarly found among many other black women characters of contemporary African-American literature. Blanche's search is basically embedded in the black/white relationships of the contemporary American society.

This search requires a strength which according to Trudier Harris can escalate and become a damaging force for others or the character's self. The reliance on herself makes Blanche a strong woman. Concerning the notions of strength discussed by Harris and Walton/Jones, she is both, the feminist and the nurturer, but still remains somewhat different. Blanche is not an agitating, male-despising feminist but rather, as Barbara Neely put it, "a behavioral feminist", somebody "who does not come to feminism through an organization

or the academy or reading books, but from her gut; her life experience has told her that it's in her best interest to behave like a feminist." (Goeller). Even while fleeing from an unjust sentence and finding herself in another hostile environment, alone, without money as in *Blanche on the Lam*, she knows she can rely on herself: "... certainly Blanche could get herself out of this mess she was in, just as black women had been getting themselves and their people out of messes in this country since the day the first kidnapped African woman was dragged onto these shores" (77-78). In *Blanche Among the Talented Tenth*, she encounters in Mattie Harris a "theoretical" feminist, a sophisticated black woman who seems to be comfortable in both the black and the white worlds. Although Blanche acknowledges Mattie's wit and intelligence, she is mocking the feminist theories: "... she had a hard time picturing Mattie out in the fields picking apples and berries, helping a neighbor birth a child, tending the village fire. But, writing a book that convinced a young black woman that she has an important part to play in the world was certainly a kind of midwifery and planting and sowing and mothering." (189). But Mattie had secretly given birth to a child and never admitted being its mother... When Blanche finds out, Mattie betrays their friendship by demanding Blanche's silence and humiliating her. "Mattie hadn't reached out for a friend, even a temporary one. She'd reached out for someone to help her cover her tracks.... 'I guess you figured I was used to cleaning up other people's dirt and keeping quiet about it, so why not yours?'... And what would all those women who think you're the last word in womanhood have to say about this shit, I wonder?'" (220-221). Thus, Barbara Neely has Blanche criticize the type of educated theoretical feminism that fails in reality. In a wider frame, Blanche's critique symbolizes a

critique of DuBois' concept of the Talented Tenth - and of the "men" who his concept refers to - who with respect to the present situation of blacks seem to have failed.¹² With Blanche's utterance "'There's more than one way to be poor, more than one kind of education and a whole lot of ways to be ignorant.'" (221), Neely alludes to a quest for a stronger black leadership which is elaborated in *Blanche Cleans Up* where she dismantles corrupt black policies within her community. Wesley expresses a similar critique: "'Just think of where we'd be as a people if all of those with money and power and not just a precious few had used their privilege to build institutions that would help us all instead of wasting so much time and money trying to out-white the white man.'" (*Devil Riding* 141).

Blanche's "behavioral" feminism is most evident in *Blanche Passes Go* when she - after having worked through in her mind her experiences with rape and her mother's experiences with domestic violence - stands up for her neighbor, whom she saw repeatedly being beaten and humiliated by her husband: She grabs a pot and bangs its bottom with a spoon hard and loud, shouting at the assailant until the whole neighborhood is mobilized and the man disappears (316-317).

And there are more instances in which Blanche communicates her feminism. In this way, she to some extent appears to be the type of savior who, according to Harris, "...use their strength for saving purposes" (29) but whose godlike status prevents others from approaching them (67-68) and who become icons in respect to certain attributes projected on black women, such as sacrifice, endurance and mothering. Similar to Baby Suggs in Toni Morrison's

¹² See Cornel West's *Race Matters* p. 53-70.

Beloved, Blanche appears as a comforter and healer which also corresponds to the claim that female detectives act “not just in their own right” but as well for those “innocently involved in crimes.” (Walton 207). Blanche, for example, investigates Nate’s death in *Blanche on the Lam* because she does not believe his death was an accident and even saves the white Mumsfield from getting betrayed. But healing and comforting is furthermore extended to other minor characters of the books: In *Blanche Among the Talented Tenth*, she helps Tina stand up for herself against the color-struck mother of her boyfriend, in *Blanche Cleans Up*, she advises her teenage niece in order to help her make the right decision regarding her pregnancy. Healing is further attributed to black women in general. Like Baby Suggs in her address to the black community, Blanche wants to teach black women to love themselves. “Formerly unloved persons must learn to love themselves; that is the primary lesson Baby Suggs teaches.” (Harris 61). Blanche often refers to the beauty of her natural hair and body. Learning to love their own bodies seems to be so necessary for black women, especially poor black women, as this example from *Precious* shows:

Cut cut cut arm wrist, not trying to die, trying to plug myself back in. I am a TV set wif no picture. I am broke wif no mind. No past or present time. Only the movies of being someone else. Someone not fat, dark skin, short hair, someone not fucked. A pink virgin girl. (114) ... Ms Rain say write our fantasy of ourselves. How we would be if life was perfect. I tell you one thing right now, I would be light skinned, thereby treated right and loved by boyz. Light even more important than being skinny; you see them light-skinned girls that’s big an’ fat, they got boyfriends. Boyz overlook a lot to be wif a white girl or yellow girl, ... So that’s my fantasy, is get light.” (115-116)

But unlike Baby Suggs, Blanche is not a suprahuman icon, nor does she meet Harris’ description of a strong woman in the negative sense. She is not introspective since she communicates with her friend Ardell on a most intimate

basis; she does not dominate her children but becomes actively involved in the issues that affect them; she does not “cripple black men” but rather tries to build up an equally based relationship with Thelvin in *Blanche Passes Go*. She also experiences failure and self-doubts as also can be seen in *Blanche Passes Go* when her revenge on her rapist seems to be completed but did not bring her the feeling of gratification she expected. Thus, Blanche is a “work in progress”; she is in the process of negotiating her identity in respect to skin color, class, gender, and community. This learning process is also an important trait of characters in classic literature. In contemporary writing by black women, their female characters often experience a challenge to their identity that reaches out from the past and forces them to rediscover their roots, such as Avey Johnson in Paule Marshall’s book *Praise Song for the Widow* whose life in luxury became unbearable to her and made her come back to the land, stories, songs, and rites of her ancestors in the Caribbean in order to find her peace of mind. Another such character is Jadine in Toni Morrison’s book *Tar Baby* who is a successful modern young woman in the model branch. Her identity is challenged by a tall woman “with skin like tar against the canary yellow dress”, “with too much hip, too much bust” (45) who makes Jadine feel “inauthentic” (48), moreover, the “night women” like tentacles from the past in form of female figures who represent the nurturers of mankind or the Earthmother reach out for her “to get her, tie her, bind her. Grab the person she had worked hard to become and choke it off with their soft loose tits” (262). But Jadine is too closely tied to her wealth and her white protégées – for Blanche a typical case of Darkies Disease – so that she feels rather disturbed and threatened by her unknown past and finally decides to abandon it and to go on with her life

which promises her a luxury life. It seems that Jadine has lost her search for her own self “that sometimes I want to get out of my skin and be only the person inside – not American – not black – just me” (48). Jadine is not able to make bonds neither with her rather African part of the past nor with the more recent African-American past and present. For Tamara, the bond with the latter is possible in the commitment for her black community, her acknowledgement of the ties to her past, and her network of friends. Unlike Morrison, Wesley puts the emphasis on the ties to a more recent past – the 1967 riots in Newark, the housing projects for blacks – and thus seems to promote the idea of a differentiated black community which moves towards universality.

Blanche, however, seems to correspond to the authenticity that Jadine lacks – in her appearance as well as in her apparent rooted place in life; she is an established member of the black community and her ongoing identity struggles are rather concerned with class, race, and gender. Blanche experiences a healing similar to – but not equal to – that of Celie in Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* or that of Precious in Sapphire’s *Push*. All of them became victims of rape and male violence and were not able to find a way to retaliate. They were afraid that they would not be taken seriously and be looked down upon because of what happened to them. Their only chance to be healed was to find strength in the company of other women – Celie was helped by Shug, Precious by the women from her new school, and Blanche by Ardell – so that they were able to develop a new identity and regained their independence by sowing (Celie), by learning how to write (Precious), and by pursuing revenge (Blanche).

Blanche’s underlying search leads her toward a “black separatist viewpoint” (Soitos 232) or an “Afrocentrist world view” (Müller), however, Blanche’s

self-reflections in the last book of the series express her inner conflict and uncertainty about her future: “Maybe the town was once again giving her a ‘Get out!’ message” (*Passes Go* 318), she doubts that she could join Ardell’s catering business, and she is also unsure of her relationship with Thelvin.

Valerie Wilson Wesley says of her protagonist: “Tamara is a very American character” (Fischer-Hornung/Müller). Concerning the character traits of Tamara, the detective part of her personality is the most dominant. She became a cop, following in her idolized brother Johnny’s foot steps and obeying her keen sense of right and wrong. Seeing law and order being disregarded by the police themselves as her son and his friends were attacked without reason by her “brethren in blue” (*Death* 112), her decision to quit her job and become a private investigator is a step which manifests her critique of a patriarchal and racist legal system. However, Tamara gives up the opportunity to have access to power as she leaves the force in contrast to Marti McAllister, Eleanor Taylor Bland’s African-American female detective, who remains a cop in order to maintain her influence. However, remaining inside a power structure with certain rules might distort the view of the legal system and even obstruct commenting and acting objectively on it (Walton/Jones 204-205). Moreover, Tamara like Blanche is not only able to solve the crime but also to act “for the abjected ‘other’”, a distinguishing feature of the contemporary female detective (ibid. 207).

However, in regards to the search that Blanche and other black women characters undergo, Tamara’s self is less challenged. Since she has achieved her independence her identity as a detective and a woman are relatively stable. Her professional independence as a private investigator and her personal

independence as a single mother raising her teenage son is thus her expression of feminism. Yet her independence and toughness do not make her the suprahuman, introspective, dominating, strong woman Trudier Harris depicted as another stereotype of women in African American literature. Tamara is aware of the need for comfort and support from other women: “Black women and food, sisterly comfort when you need it – brothers may fail you, money may fly, but there’s always good food and the grace to offer it” (*Death* 241). Similar to Blanche, Tamara uses the network of women in her community to find information about people and matters. Tamara’s starting point is not a wise old woman like Blanche’s Miz Minnie or Miz Barker but Wyvetta, the owner of a beauty salon downstairs from her office. A place like Wyvetta’s is also present in McMillan’s *Waiting to Exhale*: In Gloria’s Oasis Hair “most of the people who came to her shop either knew each other or knew of each other, and Phillip and Joseph knew *all* the gossip – a.k.a. dirt – about all of them and usually kept everybody in stitches in the absence of that person on that day” (72). While having their hair done or their nails polished, women exchange the latest gossip about their surrounding. A customer herself, Tamara sprinkles her questions into the round, unsuspecting, always protecting her client’s confidence.

She also has a best girlfriend who gives her mental and economic support and takes care of her son Jamal. The women in Tamara’s environment rather influence her work than herself. Tamara needs their help for the investigation and she knows how other black women feel and how she has to bond with them. Being conscious of her physical and mental strength, Tamara is very protective and feels responsible for her alleged weaker or threatened “sisters”,

thus also representing a kind of savior. In *The Devil Riding*, her care for teenage street girls causes her to pursue an investigation in Atlantic City where she searches for a runaway. In *Easier to Kill* she is not only the detective who tries to find the murderer of Mandy Magic's friends but also the comforter who tries to smooth Mandy's mind.

Besides expressing her connectedness to women, Tamara is also communicating feminism, yet in a rather idealistic kind of way, as in a conversation between Tamara and a witness:

'I didn't know a black woman could be a private investigator.' 'We can be anything we want to be these days, Minnie,' I said, and then hoped that the words hadn't sounded sarcastic. The wonder in her voice had touched me, and I didn't want her to think I was making fun of her. 'I mean, there's nobody holding you back from doing what you want to do anymore.' (*Devil's* 221-222).

It can be concluded that this and similar statements, as well as Tamara being a successful woman, adhere to the principle of "Wunscherfüllung" that Keitel isolated and which refers to the concept that reading about constructs of daily problems is a way to experience and probe them in fantasy (105). In this sense, Blanche is also an idealistic character who is able to use her outlaw status as a detective in order to take revenge on the man who raped her whereas Precious appears to be a realistic character who is bound to her social status.

Tamara also remains idealistic even when her opinions are challenged:

I've always admired superachieving sisters who stride over mountains without missing a step. I'd even invited her to join Ujamaa House, an organization of take-care-of-business women that I'm proud to belong to. But when I'd told Ramona that our organization was made up of women – all kinds, all jobs, all income levels – her eyes had glazed over and a condescending smile had settled on her lips. 'Black women don't have any power. Why should I join an organization with people who are all less powerful than me?' she'd said with a barely concealed sneer and absolutely no sense of shame. I have to admit, I held I against her. (*Easier* 33-34).

The fact that Tamara is primarily a detective does not seem to allow the elaboration of those statements and thus, Tamara's attitudes remain rather unchallenged. She understands the problems of race, class, and gender from her past, from growing up in the projects of Newark and cannot accept herself as a social climber:

It was a rich-girl suit, I decided as I surveyed myself in the mirror. Black-woman-on-the-move suit – elegant and undeniably professional. ... The kind girls like me who grew up in the projects in the Central Ward, whose daddies worked in paint factories, whose mamas did day work, aren't supposed to own. A suit for the grown-up daughters of the women my mother used to work for – the rich little black girls whose mothers gave me their cast-off clothes. ... *I don't belong here.* (*Devil's* 23).

Still, Tamara's critical reflections are rarely elaborated so that she appears to be rather an observer than a critic. Conflicts are conveyed more so by the stories than by Tamara's personality. This mere observing has been criticized by Andrew Pepper: "What also disappoints is Wesley's failure to explore how the often conflicting axes of class, gender and race might work to undermine or dislocate the kind of secure, unproblematic identity that her detective seems to possess" (85).

Thus it seems that Wesley's commenting on and criticizing of social topics, such as class and internal racism, is not mediated by her protagonist – whereas Neely has Blanche directly point out these topics – but rather through the stories, which Tamara tells and without being judgmental so that her identity is not questioned. However, class is an issue which is dominant in *No Hiding Place* in the same way as skin color is problematic in *The Devil Riding*. Still, it seems that especially this quality of her character allows Tamara to suggest her ideals, and to communicate her crossover appeal; thus she searches for balance which is not limited to her inner peace but is expanded to universality. Maybe

this is the reason why it is easier for Tamara, rather than for Blanche, to cross the bridges that race and gender difference sometimes create. Concerning race, Tamara is conscious of her African-American worldview but seems to be open for a friendship with a white woman, a police officer at her former Belvington Heights Police Department where Tamara used to work. “We shared another laugh, and I wondered for a moment if what we had in common – single motherhood, sons, herbal tea, DeLorca – could overcome the chasm and discomfort that race always seems to create between people who might otherwise easily become friends” (*Devil’s* 78). Even closer is her relationship to her former boss at the police department, Captain DeLorca, who “feels he owes me for the racist, sexist shit his men piled on me before I left his force.... He’s one of the few white men I trust completely, and I’d bet serious money that I’m the only black woman with whom he has ever had more than a passing word. We’re friends, uneasily connected in ways that people who know us both find puzzling,” (*Hiding* 103-104).

Blanche, on the other hand, is reluctant to acknowledge her sympathy for the white Mumsfield because “she didn’t want to shower concern on someone whose ancestors had most likely bought and sold her ancestors as though they were shoes or machines” (*Lam* 182) and finally abandons their kind of friendship in *Blanche Passes Go*. Her despise for white upper class people is always present; she only feels comfortable around white characters who belong like herself to the working class, such as Wanda in *Blanche Cleans Up*, who is a white woman who cleans houses.

Thus, Tamara and Blanche portray different paradigms of relationships between blacks and whites. Whereas Blanche’s attentiveness of this

relationship goes back to slavery, Tamara focuses on more recent events, such as the riots in Newark in 1967, and the development of the city. These different references of history reflect the diverging opinions about contemporary African-American literature as discussed in chapter 2. Blanche's historical consciousness appears more comprehensive and sees the problems of the present rooted in slavery, a theme found in many contemporary writings by black women, whereas Tamara focuses on the recent past in her particular area. Wesley's concept seems to be less connected to the deep rooted historical consciousness that slavery passed on to the present, however, the strong presence of Newark in her books adds a depth to Tamara's character and contributes to a better understanding of recent historical events: "Working as a black and female PI in the city of Newark where she was born, always also means that every investigation is also an investigation into her own past and her family's history as well as a confrontation with the city's latent racism and sexism." (Birkle 8).

As much as they seem to differ from one another, Blanche and Tamara have in common their search for the ideal man, their complicated relationship with their mother. It is due to Tamara's search for balance that she also tries to present the male characters in her stories in a partly idealized, partly adjusted way. Tamara's ideals are her dead brother Johnny, an exemplary police officer and socially engaged member of their community, and Jake, a lawyer and childhood friend. Tamara relies on Jake for mental support, for advice in educating her son, and for his professional assistance and she is attracted by his good looks: "Every move he makes is marked by the elegance that some black men seem to come by naturally, ... He has a drop-dead magnetism that takes

over any space he enters and an unwitting charm that enchants juries and women alike and sparks from him like static electricity” (*Easier* 23). He is also the “good brother”: “He is always there for anybody in the neighborhood who needs him ... And he’s what my father used to call a ‘race man’: One of those brothers who will always fight the good fight, a living challenge to every lie that was ever told about black folks – a man in the tradition of Malcolm X, Frederick Douglass, Nelson Mandela - ...” (*Devil’s* 135). But Jake can not be there as a husband for Tamara because he is married to a mentally ill woman who is dependent upon him. Johnny too is unavailable for her because he committed suicide. Both are depicted as model men who do not seem to exist yet (Décuré 167-168), and Wesley as well moves her expectations of men to the political level by mentioning those former black leaders. Thus she meets Cornel West’s critique of contemporary black male leadership in his book *Race Matters*. Wesley’s other male characters seem to correspond to the stereotype of the bad black man (ibid. 167) whose major failure is their commitment to serious and truthful relationships. However, Wesley not only acknowledges the hardships black men have to experience – as Décuré suggests – but rather tries to add more facets to them. Basil Dupre, for example, not only embodies the non-committing seducer but also the romantic knight, the unscrupulous fighter on his way from poverty to shady wealth, the tender and caring father and son. The pimp Rufus Greene in *Easier to Kill* is also a parent, who loves his child, supports her and “tried to play some small part in her life” (174).

Blanche experiences a similar quest for the ideal man, and in her problematic relationship with Thelvin she acknowledges possible reasons for the many relationships between black women and black men which do not

seem to function. Whereas in Tamra's world the no committing men seem to dominate, Blanche's ex-boyfriend Leo and her new acquaintance Thelvin are rather too possessive in a relationship. Blanche's love for Thelvin is overshadowed by his jealousy and urge to occupy most of her time. She eventually finds a kind of explanation when she hears about Thelvin's problems on his job. "Maybe being a black man – the most hated human being in the country – and mostly working jobs where somebody else had all the say had something to do with wanting exclusive ownership of a woman's life. Of course, absolutely none of that made it healthy or all right" (*Blanche Passes Go* 289). Race relations thus influence also Blanche's relationship to Thelvin, and Neely again points out the nature of Blanche's search for her inner self that is embedded in the ever present relationships between blacks and whites.

However, Neely presents at least two more important male characters who do not fit the stereotype but rather seem to embody a type of legendary African-American man. In *Blanche on the Lam*, Blanche meets Nate, the gardener of the white family, who tells her at first how he was saved by his employers from the Klan – but only because he was supposed to take care of their whelping dog – and comes then into talking about more intimate details about the employer's family:

Blanche leaned back in her chair and adopted a listening pose. Nate had already proved to her that he was a storytelling man. She knew enough storytelling folks ... to know that a storytelling person couldn't be rushed. Their rhythm, the silences between their words, and their intonation were as important to the telling of the tale as the words they spoke. The story might sound like common gossip when told by another person, but in the mouth of a storyteller, gossip was art (93-94).

Nate can be viewed as the griot, a traditional storyteller from Western Africa, a preserver of the traditional oral culture, who functions as a symbol of

African-American culture and serves as a link to Blanche's African heritage and Afrocentrist worldview.

The second character is Othello Flood in *Blanche Cleans Up*, who started an organization for former convicts with the goal to make their neighborhood safer and to prevent young black men from becoming imprisoned. Blanche accepts the help of the organization because she and her family feel threatened. With their help she sets a trap to catch the murderer. The organization's motto of always giving "a hundred and ten percent" (218) means that they take the law into their own hands and pass judgment on the culprit themselves, an issue that is of great importance for African-American crime fiction.¹³ Othello, then, embodies the African-American resistance fighter who as an outlaw stands up to the system. Since Nate is an easy victim and Othello an outlaw, Neely's exceptional male characters - like Wesley's - are representations of the nonexistent "good black man".

Concerning their relationships with men, Tamara and Blanche make similar experiences like Terry McMillan's characters in *Waiting to Exhale* who do not belong to "these women who think that a man is the answer to everything" (2). With respect to age, class, and appearance, Tamara is certainly more like the four black women than Blanche is, moreover, the book is set in the black middle class milieu. All of them in their mid thirties, one of them is a divorced mother of two, working as a bookkeeper, another one has a teenage son and owns a hair salon, two more are single women, floating in different relationships. If Tamara's involvement with crime is neglected, one sees basically the same stories: finding Mr. Right, working for the community,

¹³ See also the paragraph about justice in the section „The Detectives“.

raising children, having girlfriends, bumping against the glass ceiling, encountering white women, appeasing their mothers. Those four women show the same attitude of hesitant approach towards white women as Tamara – except of Bernadine whose husband left her for a white woman –; their consciousness of being black is dominating but whiteness does not seem to become as polemical a topic like it does in Neely's stories about Blanche.

Nicole Décuré isolated the mothers as a distinguishing characteristic of black women's fiction (163). In contemporary novels, such as *Waiting to Exhale*, *Push*, or *Paradise*, mothers often appear as background characters; nevertheless, they represent problematic presences for their daughters because they correspond to the negative pattern of strength Harris isolated, either in the form of oppressing domination or heroic endurance. The mothers, then, are not only a distinguishing feature of black women's fiction, they, moreover, seem to represent the change of what women are and what women would like to be, they function as a link between a past image and a progressive present not only in the social sense but also in the literary framework of images. Both, Tamara and Blanche, have problematic relationships with their mothers. Tamara's mother died when she was a teenager and since that time she lives with the memory of her mother's incomprehensible cruelty:

I tell myself that the memory of my mother's cruelty has been blurred by time, that my memories are worse than the actuality. ... I have never understood why she seemed to hate me so. ... Knocking the black off. That was what she called it when she beat me, which was often and without mercy. Knocking the black off, as if she were determined to go to the center of who I was and erase it. (*Devil's* 55-56). I think about my mother when I consider the ties that don't bind, and anger and love so tangled you're not sure you'll ever make sense of them (*ibid.* 227).

Tamara herself cannot explain the reason for her mother's behavior but one can conclude – as Décuré does – that the reason lies in a form of racism which

found its way into the black community (164). Tamara's mother used to be a domestic in white people's houses and saw each day what life could be like and she knew it would never be for her because she was black and her husband and her kids were all black. Similar to Precious' mother in *Push*, who saw the prosperous life in TV, the mothers in the face of their helplessness developed a self-hate that they turned against their children. The daughters, then, learn how to stand up for their convictions and at the same time find peace with their mothers or at least in their minds.

Blanche's mother is a nonviolent but still a "tongue-whipping" (*Cleans Up* 14) and tough authority in her life. Her mother appears to be the strong, dominating woman Trudier Harris describes. Blanche and her mother have a trustful but distanced relationship in which Blanche feels always in the position of an immature child. Blanche expresses these conflicting feelings towards her mother by referring to her as either Miz Cora or Mama:

But it was Miz Cora's nearly nonstop tirade that made Blanche feel as though she's lost forty years. It was the same tongue-whipping Blanche had been getting since she was old enough to make her own decisions. ... Blanche sighed and wondered how it would be if just once her mother started a conversation with something other than a put-down (*Passes Go* 13-14).

But it is not racism that disturbs their relationship but rather Blanche's distinctiveness that does not fit Miz Cora's idea of a woman. "You always did have to be different!' Miz Cora turned the slip over and attacked it again. 'Even when you was a chile, you went your own way regardless of other people's feelins. It aint a nice thing in a woman, Blanche'" (ibid. 14). Because of her involvement in the neighbor woman's problem with her violent husband, Blanche by chance learns that her mother was beaten by her husband before she finally left him. Her mother had not wanted her to know because she was

her father's favorite child. Blanche had always wanted to find out who Cora was and not Mama but it did not make her happy to imagine her "independent, take-no-prisoners, stronger-than-truth Mama wailing and cowering in a corner of her own kitchen" (ibid. 253). Blanche then applies black women's experiences to universality:

She wondered if there were women in the world who hadn't been slapped, or probed, or punched, or shouted out or down, or at least scared for half a second when some man – on purpose or by accident – let her see, in the way he stood over her, or punched his fist into his open palm, or inflated his chest and moved a step closer, just how their argument of difference of opinion could easily be solved and who would win and how (ibid.).

Blanche thus acknowledges a universal community of women, a unity that can eventually be used to stand up against violence, just as Blanche practices in banging her pots to drive out her neighbors beating husband. A similar universality was also expressed by Tamara when she considers the things she has in common with a white female police cop: single motherhood, sons, herbal tea.

Blanche and Tamara as black women not only have a strong realistic appeal but also show similarities to characters from contemporary non-genre fiction. Blanche's afrocentrist viewpoint helps her find healing, empowerment, and a sense of self which is not dependent upon white people's culture. Tamara's search is based on her African-American consciousness and leads toward American pluralism.

Furthermore, Blanche and Tamara are idealistic characters because they are governed by the conventions of the detective figure who is an outlaw and therefore able to speak for minorities but at the same time remains an idealized figure. They do not adhere to the stereotypical images of black women or

conform to the negative conventions of strong black women in literature which Harris mentioned. They possess unique black features as well as universal characteristics which make their narrative voices and the reader seem to be crucial in determining how intense the black experience is presented.

4. Composing and Reading

The development of the main characters Tamara and Blanche reflects the narrative strategies Neely and Wesley choose to use for addressing their audiences. These strategies are not only visible in the characters' appearances and utterances but also in the text structure. The nature of these rather complex characters is made possible by the concept of "seriality" (Molander 13) which allows the continued development of the characters just like the development of protagonists in a classical novel. Details about Blanche's and Tamara's lives are not only repeated in the different books of the series but are also elaborated on and gradually reveal the complexity of the characters; moreover, the decisions made and actions taken by the protagonist have consequences in the subsequent books (Molander 150). The reader's familiarity with the characters of black detective fiction creates an attachment to the series. Thus recurrences and consequences are important not only for promoting the sale of the series but also promote a reading strategy which "encourages readerly involvement" (Walton/Jones 53). Thus, "seriality" contributes to a simultaneous completion and development of the protagonist's personality and also to the "educational effect of repetitive information" (Molander 152). This strategy gives the author the opportunity to develop a complex and dynamic protagonist and to transmit not only the protagonist's but also the author's worldview.

The recurrences and elaborations of the details from the protagonist's personal life have the effect of an open ending and thus support the character's "search" as described in chapter 3. In this way, not only progression and change in the character's life become visible but also a further fulfillment of her search. In the fourth book, Blanche and her mother are finally able to develop a better understanding for each other after her mother reveals previously unknown details of her relationship with Blanche's father; in *No Hiding Place*, Tamara is able to "pay off" some of the debts her brother left behind after committing suicide.

However, because of the open-end structure of the series, the protagonists cannot - like characters in a single novel -, always accomplish their search but they can add to its fulfillment. An extreme change in a character's personality could put the bond which has been formed between the character and the devoted reader at risk.¹⁴

It seems that readers love Blanche and Tamara first of all because of their universal facets: being mothers, being tough and independent women, being tender and witty: "Both white and black audiences seem to enjoy Tamara for the same reason. They tell me they like her sense of humor and her love of family. They also appreciate her independence and tender heart." (Wesley, e-mail to the author, October 2003). A similar statement was made in a customer review about Blanche: "... Blanche and I don't share an ethnic or social background, but we sure do share a lot of frustrations with teenaged children, social climbers, middle-aged bodies, and fickle men. And, it's Blanche's quick wit and humanity that enables her to solve the mystery at the same time she

¹⁴ See reader comment on page 78.

provides a valuable insight into her life and values, and into my own.” (a reader from Traverse City, MI, USA, June 1999).

However, the additional facets of the narrator’s voice - the expression of their African-American consciousness and worldview, their experiences as black women – make Tamara and Blanche distinguishable among the characters of many other series. These facets determine how the black reader or the white reader is addressed, they can disturb, comfort, or increase one’s awareness. Moreover, it is left to the reader to recognize what else these voices have to say. Such active reading encourages the reader to think beyond the solving of the crime; Barbara Neely’s books focus in particular on the socio-political aspects of the stories, as Neely states herself: “The mystery aspect of the books is the least important and interesting aspect for me” (Goeller). It seems then that Neely - from her first to her fourth book - reduces the “pacifying feeling” (Walton/Jones 212) which the reader of detective fiction usually experiences when the crime has been solved and law and order have been reestablished. In Neely’s as well as Wesley’s books one has to read past the mystery in order to see the other problems within the stories which have not been solved.

Aside from the search for the criminal, there are two other searches at hand: the ongoing development of the character which has been described in the previous chapter and the search for the “ideological *raison d’être* of systemic crimes” (ibid. 209) which often appears to be a “societal entity” (ibid.), such as the whiteness which was identified by Maureen Reddy (96) as the actual criminal in Walter Mosley’s detective novel *Devil in a Blue Dress* in which murder and crime happen because a black woman passes for white and wants

to maintain this identity. The black middle class status –also referred to by Reddy as “the next thing to whiteness” (100) - can be seen as the villain in Wesley’s *No Hiding Place* where a black middle class family murders in order to maintain their status and to “protect” their daughter from her unemployed pimping boyfriend. While the “who done it” is usually unmasked and sentenced, the underlying socio-ideological mechanisms have not been solved profoundly.

The narrative thus comprises a threefold layer of “investigations”: the search for the criminal, the search for the detective’s/the woman’s identity and the search for the crime’s underlying social conflict. Although at the end of the book, the search for the criminal is over and the expectations of the reader are satisfied, the character’s personal search goes on with the series. The third type of search, however, “is also structured to the disclosure of less easily resolved endemic injustices and oppressions, making possible a level of social or psychological inconclusiveness and thus critique” (Walton/Jones 211).

The example of Wesley’s *No Hiding Place* shows this threefold structure: Tamara’s search for balance is challenged when Bessie Raymond, a black working class woman, asks her to find the murderer of her adult son. Tamara’s first response is refusal because as a private investigator she is not equipped to look into a crime that happened seven months ago. But Tamara changes her mind when she remembers Bessie’s son as a kid who was then her dead brother Johnny’s “little brother”, a part of a program in which cops “adopted” little boys without fathers, took them to ball games, helped them with their school work and tried to keep them out of trouble (18). After Johnny’s suicide the boy was deserted and Tamara felt guilty about having neglected to care about the

others who were grieving like herself. So, by taking the case she takes responsibility and tries to compensate the imbalance her brother's death caused.

In the course of Tamara's search for the murderer she rediscovers her past through her old poor neighborhood in Newark, her brother's former colleagues and friends, and an old lover whose family is involved in the crime. Rather by chance she unravels the plot of the murder and unmask a black middle class family as the murderer of Shawn Raymond who had a baby with the daughter of this family but as a poor black man was not suitable. However, the capture of the criminal does not solve the underlying problem which is the social status of a black middle class who let themselves be orientated by whiteness. Tamara cannot prevent Bessie's grandchild, the thirteen year old Rayshawn, from shooting the woman who belonged to the family who conspired to murder his father and had his father's baby. His motivation was to destroy the one who had taken his father away from him. The real evil, then, is the social gap between a black "underclass" and a black "upper class" who commit crimes in order to maintain their status and who leave those with the same roots behind. The real victim is Bessie's grandchild who has been left without hope for a future, just like many of the black children living in poverty.

Whereas in Tamara's stories the three layers can be separated from each other, in Blanche's stories, the layer of the story which presents the search for the criminal is embedded in Blanche's personal life. This construction is due in part to the structure of the amateur sleuth story because the amateur sleuth needs a motivation different from that of professionals in order to conduct an investigation. Blanche's deep personal involvement in each of the stories

results in her searching for solutions to social problems while at the same time trying to solve the crime. In *Blanche Cleans Up*, the issue of lead poisoning causing mental damage and promoting violence among young blacks living in the projects appears at first to be an unrelated part of the detective story; however, it might also serve to slow down the investigational progress and distract the reader. As Blanche accompanies her nephew Malik to an environmental meeting, she first learns about this problem and expresses doubts about the link between lead poisoning and violence. However, this subplot develops into a story that parallels the story of the Blanche's investigation¹⁵: the same corrupt black and white politicians are involved in both stories, and Blanche unmasks the murderer as well as the hypocritical minister who was responsible for the lead poisoning. At the end of the book, the thesis of lead poisoning causing violence and mental damage is confirmed by a radio broadcast which Blanche listens to.¹⁶

As the previous example makes clear, Neely's stories also contain underlying social problems similar to Wesley's which are rooted deeper than the explanation of the crime and are not solved with the capture of the criminal. In *Blanche Cleans Up*, one such problem is the corruptness of certain leaders in the black community which even diminishes the hope that black people can achieve justice through official channels and forces them to take the law into their own hands. Barbara Neely, thus, offers a remedy not only for Blanche's problems but also for those of her black audience. Blanche's actions and beliefs could serve as a blueprint of how to respond to white people, of how to

¹⁵ See also Monika Müller, 7.

¹⁶ Molander states that the research about lead poisoning is genuine and refers to an article by Herbert L. Needleman et al., "Bone Lead Levels and Delinquent Behavior," *Journal of the American Medical Association*, (February 7, 1996):363-69.

connect with the black community, and of how to be able to speak up for themselves.

A general term for this phenomenon of addressing a certain audience in contemporary detective fiction is Karin Molander's "special interest" which comprises besides ethnic group interests also political, regional, professional or hobby-related interests (13). She argues that "detective fiction written by and for an interest group or subculture can often be called resisting, or coded, to exclude readers who are not cast in the authorial audience" (76). The issue of resistant text has been discussed in particular by Doris Sommer with respect to minority literature: "... the strategy of these books is to produce a kind of readerly 'incompetence' that more reading [by a mainstream reader] will not overcome" ("Resistant" 524). Sommer does not refer to the "final undecidability of interpretation" or "what 'insiders' can know as opposed to 'outsiders'" ("Textual" 147, 148) but refers to the announcement in the text that the mainstream reader has only limited access to the text: "the rhetoric of selective, socially differentiated understanding" ("Textual" 147).¹⁷ Thus, it seems not to be the elements of the black vernacular as Soitos defined them or the "special interest" Molander isolated which truly establish "readerly incompetence" - since knowledge about these elements can be acquired - but rather the way in which the text remains silent or inaccessible for the outsider audience. Since this strategy of excluding a certain audience in particular implies the inclusion of the other audience, it appears to be important then for

¹⁷ Sommer in her article "Resistant Texts and Incompetent Readers" gives examples from Toni Morrison's *Beloved*: "She and Baby Suggs had agreed without saying so that it was unspeakable;" (525) and from Harriet Jacob's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*: "You 'whose purity has been sheltered from childhood, who have been free to choose the objects of your affection, whose homes are protected by law, do not judge the poor desolate slave girl too severely!'" (532) which divide the readership into two groups: those who are able to identify with the particular history implied in the text and those who are not.

the strength of the presentation of the black experience in texts by black authors. However, the general appeal of detective fiction is the reader's identification with the detective so that the creation of signs by the author which could cause this "readerly incompetence" seems to be limited. The apparent absence of those signs, then, would mean that popular texts indeed lack a strong presentation of the black experience.

Blanche's religious practice which leans towards hoodoo is in fact an instance of the black vernacular culture and because of its difference from western religion, it is not immediately accessible for the ordinary white reader, however, Blanche explains her religion and how she developed it so that every reader is invited to learn about her practice and some may even be challenged to make further inquiries about it. Arguably, two of Blanche's comments could be considered as instances of "readerly incompetence". The first being: "She could picture herself a hundred shades lighter with her facial features sharpened up; but 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" (*Talented Tenth* 20). The second: "For many years, Blanche worried that it was fear which sometimes made her reluctant to meet white people's eyes, ... She'd come to understand that her desire was to avoid pain, a pain so old, so deep, its memory was carried not in her mind, but in her bones" (*Lam* 111).

Both of the examples indicate that at this point the white reader is excluded from understanding Blanche's experience and Neely thus presents here a truly black experience. There are, however, many examples in both, Neely's and

Wesley's books, which indicate their distance toward the white audience.¹⁸ But here another difficulty of "readerly competence" occurs in the decision as to whether the exclusion of the mainstream audience appears as a silent and silencing signal for the outsider or as an instructive signal, in other words, does the text invite the mainstream reader to become intimate with the author's culture or does it demand the respect of acknowledging the fact that certain intimate knowledge cannot be shared. Whenever Blanche refers directly to white people, she indicates their difference and at the same time tries to instruct white people about the feeling of what it means to be black in contemporary American society.

There were fourteen people already there. Six of them were white – the largest group of whites Blanche ever had seen in Roxbury, except cops. They were all sitting together with tight little smiles on their faces, their hands folded in their laps like schoolchildren under a mean teacher. If they were so uncomfortable, why had they come? ... Blanche wondered if they had the minority jitters: Did they think everyone was looking at them? Did they think they felt an unwelcoming vibe from some people in the audience? Were they getting a hint of the stress of being black in a mostly white and often evil-acting country? (*Cleans Up* 64).

This way of speaking directly to the white reader implies his/her incompetence: Does the black author want white people to know or does the black author suggest instead that non-blacks will never really know?

It seems, then, that these audience exclusive or audience inclusive strategies depend to a great extent on the narrative strategies of the stories because the institution of the narrator decides how the perspectives of silence, neutrality or instruction are mediated. Walton and Jones in particular emphasize the importance of the first-person narrator. A major characteristic of the traditional hard-boiled detective novel, the first-person narrator achieves in its feminine

¹⁸ Further examples will be mentioned later in this chapter.

variant a new quality. Besides the stylistic features of the first-person narrator, such as a chronological progression and a limited point of view, the most important function of the first-person narrator is that it forces the reader to identify with the narrator (ibid. 151). The voice of the detective tells a life story similar to an autobiographical narrative that provides subjective insights which reflect on the "... living, speaking, and specifically *gendered* body of the detective" (ibid. 152). It must be added that in the case of an African-American female detective not only the female body is acting and speaking but also the body's racial dimension. Thus far, the conventions of the genre are deliberately used to offer the reader a subjective feminine, ethnic and racial point of view. Walton and Jones further emphasize the perceptive aspect of the autobiographical nature of the detective novels and argue "... autobiographical narration is a significant example of how the genre may make less politically engaged readers (both women and men) aware of issues of race, gender, and power through the intersection of potentially conflicting interests and identifications that take place at the site of the narrating 'I'" (160). It would seem that the first-person narrator in detective fiction increases the identification of the reader even further than in mere autobiographical novels in which the reader learns about the life of another person.

Detective novels are considered to be read mainly because of their mystery or riddle appeal so that the reader so to speak takes the place of the detective. The story of the investigation can thus be considered the most common ground between reader and detective/narrator. Although, at the same time, excluding what they have in common, the stories and elements which accompany the mystery, such as the setting, social and family aspects, the life of the victim

and the murderer, increase the reader's awareness of a difference. The reader is then required to find new common grounds and to negotiate the positions of the narrator with those of his or her own. The increased level of identification between the detective, the narrator and the reader causes an increased awareness of similarities and differences when the process of identification is disturbed. In Walton and Jones, Valerie Wilson Wesley, describing this appeal, is quoted as saying:

In mysteries we learn the differences and similarities between people. And the certain things that touch you not matter who you are. And I think that's a good thing, that mysteries teach you that. They teach you that consciousness, *and you learn it because the book is in the first person and you can't help but identify*. ... And ... I like to be a part of it. I like opening the world. (161).

In this way, the "I"-voice of her detective Tamara emphasizes her openness towards others and her ability to establish interracial relationships which have been discussed in the previous chapter.

Another important element of the first-person narrator is his/her ability to be reflexive which is expressed in a subtext of self-reflection or self-investigation by the narrator. By questioning her own assumptions and actions, the narrator speaks to herself and at the same time to the reader who is challenged to respond emotionally or rationally/reasonably. Walton and Jones argue that "In fact, in the course of the story, the narrator (and potentially the reader too) is changed by those responses" (168). In *Devil's Gonna Get Him*, the hateful relationship of a client's wife and her daughter Alexa remind Tamara of her own shattered feelings of love and hate for her mother. In the end, she learns through Alexa, whose mother deceived her and became a murderer, to forgive her own mother and find peace:

She told me she had moved closer to the town where Daphne would be serving her life sentence so that she could visit her more frequently. ‘How were you able to forgive her?’ I finally asked her. ‘I had no choice. I had to find my peace. She *is* my mother, after all,’ she said, ... That night I looked for those hateful letters I’d written to my own dead mother so long ago. . . . I read the letters one last time, and when no tears came, took them into the kitchen and burned them one by one in the sink. ‘I love you, Mommy,’ I said aloud, forgiving ma mother as I forgave myself, and finding some peace at last. (275-276).

It seems to me that this narrative strategy of reflexivity can also be considered as an offer of dialog between narrator and reader whereas Walton and Jones attribute the dialogic function rather to the conversations the narrator has with other characters about various topics (169). This example also confirms that Wesley has Tamara pursue a search for an all-encompassing harmony that in the end also soothes the mind of the reader. However, both techniques, self-reflection and conversation, do present various illuminations of certain topics so that the reader like the narrator/detective has to maneuver his or her way through these sometimes differentiating standpoints.

Although Walton and Jones for the most part analyzed both techniques with respect to the narrator in hard-boiled detective fiction, it seems that reflexivity and conversation can also be applied to the third-person narrator in the amateur detective stories. Blanche’s self-reflections in the uneasy environment of the rich black sea resort are formed as questions to herself which can also be understood as questions to the reader:

How would her conversation with Mattie and Carol have been different if they’d known she cleaned houses for a living? She didn’t entertain the possibility that here would have been no difference; she’d been around too long to believe that. Why was it that the work a woman did in her own home was praised, while doing the same work in someone else’s home made a lesser being? Is that why she hadn’t mentioned her occupation? Had she purposely not mentioned it? Was this how what was happening to Taifa and Malik began, by being just a little bit slow to be honest about who you were so that you could fit in with people you thought might look down on

you if they knew just how very different you were from them? The last question made her pause in buttoning her dress. 'Watch yourself, girlfriend,' she told her reflection in the mirror. 'Just you watch yourself.' (*Talented Tenth* 37-38).

The importance of the first-person narrator has been emphasized because it provides the most effective form of subjectivity for reader identification and reader communication, thus opening one's mind in order to better understand the female and the black perspective which thus far has not been typical for the genre. In this sense, the third-person-narrator appears to be less influential because in the mind of the reader it is not the "I" which is thinking and acting but the "she", thus creating a permanent awareness that the hero is another person from which the reader is distant.

By using a she-narrator, Neely seems to waive the opportunity to make Blanche the identifiable, one-to-one communicating character. But despite the third-person narrator, the reader is consistently made aware of Blanche's inner perspective, her feelings, thoughts, and self-reflections. Throughout the series the narrator presents Blanche's point of view. This has to a certain extent the effect that Blanche's voice is perceived individually and this allows the reader to identify with her. Still, closeness and distance are provoked at the same time which suggests that the third-person narrator possesses a distinctive power. The underlying concept is that of a mutual communication between the individual – character or reader - and his/her surroundings. The distance created by a she-narrator allows stronger reflections on the side of the reader because - as Charlotte Reitz put it - "Blanche's reality, as Neely suggests, is collective and cannot be spoken in a single voice" (Reitz 226) and thus cannot be perceived as a single voice. Collective means at first that "Blanche's sense of self is the result of continually shifting relationships between and within her color and her

sex, her class position, and her sexuality” (Reitz 225). She depends on and draws strength from her community at the same time; giving comfort and providing help to friends and neighbors, and receiving advice and support from them: In *Blanche Passes Go*, she gets help from the members of the black community in Farleigh in order to find out information about David Palmer, her rapist.

And there seems to be also a stylistic reason for her choice of the third-person narrator. Neely uses two different styles of language: whereas the narrative is told in Standard English, the direct speech of Blanche and other characters is presented in vernacular Black English. Since Blanche is a member of the working class, among who the usage of Black English¹⁹ is wide spread, Neely, in order to be consequent, should use the black vernacular in the narrative text when using the first-person narrator. By avoiding the I-narrator, Neely avoids this almost compulsive consequence and creates texts in which the third-person narrator is accessible to a broad audience. Nevertheless, Neely supports the apparently negative image of black vernacular English in the eyes of a white audience and denies the black audience the feeling of comfort and belonging usually connected with being addressed in a quasi native language.

Still, Neely is able to address two different audiences, the black and the white reader, simultaneously but not to the same extent. On the one hand, the black reader – for the most part female - is instructed to see her beauty and her features which she can be proud of, and her wrongs in believing in the advantage of a lighter skin. On the other hand, the white reader is made aware

¹⁹ For further information see Chambers, J.K. *Sociolinguistic Theory. Linguistic Variation and its Social Significance*. Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1995 and Labov, W. “The Logic of Nonstandard English”, *Georgetown Monographs on Language and Linguistics*, vol. 22, 1969, pp. 1-22, 26-31.

of being the object that is seen as the Other. Maureen Reddy argues: "... there are direct commentaries on race matters that only make complete sense if read as directed at white readers, as 'scenes of instruction' on race. That attention to a white readership breaks the texts' pattern of addressing black women as their primary audience, sometimes causing a noticeable disruption in the flow of the narratives" (66). In *Blanche Passes Go*, a conversation between Blanche and Thelvin makes the white reader aware of what it is like to be black:

'I wish every white person, just once, could spend a day being followed around a store by Security like they got 'thief' printed on their foreheads. I wonder how they'd deal with not getting a job or an apartment because they got white skin.' 'That's why they so scared of us. They know how they act aint right. They're scared one of these days we're gonna give 'em what they know they deserve.' ...Blanche's mind rang with remembered slights and taunts, and echoes of that awful, heartbreaking instant of fear that was a part of every trip into the white world – a fear of being refused or given poor service because she was black, stopped by a cop because she was black. And it wasn't simply her fear: it was so much a part of what it meant to be black in America it mostly no longer showed itself as fear – it showed up as stress, high blood pressure, asthma, tuberculosis, heart disease, and cancer. It's like our bodies have been taught to discriminate against us, Blanche thought. (288-289).

In particular this novel seems to have raised negative critique from the white audience. Thus, Publisher's Weekly noted: "Neely is a fine phrase-maker, and her black characters are vibrantly alive. Unfortunately, with the exception of an adult male with Down's syndrome, the white characters here are all stereotypically venal, racist, stupid and mean. Such reverse discrimination marks an otherwise admirable tale." ("From the Critics" Barnesandnobles.com). Whereas some white readers understand Blanche's commentaries as helpful in order to learn about a different culture, other white readers feel attacked. Two striking examples of reader opinions show these different responses: Sally Wilson, a teacher from Georgia, wrote:

The 'Blanche' Series is a Real Eye-Opener. ... The first thing that strikes the reader – or at least me – is the barely-banked anger Black people still have against white ones. It's not something the average Caucasian realizes, in my opinion, and it certainly opened my eyes. The next thing was how Black women feel about men in general, Black men in particular. Not really all that different from the feelings white women have, when you get right down to it. All this aside, the character of Blanche White is one of the most engaging I have come across in some time. I love that she's 1)a woman, 2) middle-aged, 3)not rich, and 4)Black. What a 'detective' Barbara Neely has come up with! Definitely not of the mold of Kinsey Milhone, V.I. Warshawski, Sharon McCone, Stephanie Plum, or Carlotta Carlyle. Blanche is different from them in every way. She's as unique as Cornwell's Kay Scarpetta and Barr's Anna Pigeon, and I love it! This book felt as comfortable as an old shoe as soon as I had read three pages of it. Odd, considering the racial and feminist anger I picked up from it. Every woman should read this book. (www.barnesandnobles.com/-bookbrowser).

Another reader responded less positively to Blanche's comments about white people:

I just finished reading the 4th Blanche White book, "Blanche Passes Go." Although I love the books, by the time I finished this last one, all I could think about was, "Who the hell does Blanche think she is?" She criticizes all white people - lumps them all together, and, doesn't have the time of day for white people. She is far more prejudiced than any person I've ever met. It's at the point where I want to scream at her to "Just get the hell over it!" It is attitudes such as hers that will forever separate the races. Slaves, slavers, orientals, Irish, Italian...we all have our burdens from past generations to carry, but, the less we wrap ourselves in our previous injustices and judge each person we meet for who THEY are, not who their ancestors were, the better we'll all be, as people. I loved Blanche when I first started reading the series, but, I'm over her, now. Barbara, if you feel the way Blanche does in your portrayal of her, I feel sorry for you. In any case, I feel sorry for anyone who has that much of a grudge to carry and blames the rest of the world for her own shortcomings. Must be nice to have a scapegoat like that. (Williams, www.blanchewhite.com/-feedback.html).

Neely's achievement with her Blanche-White-Series is that her character Blanche forces the white reader into the position of the "Other's Other"; white readers seem to be disturbed either positively or negatively. As a result, a white reader's identification with Blanche seems impossible. Moreover, by having the third-person-narrator confront the white reader, Barbara Neely gives the

impression that she not only speaks collectively for and to a black audience but that she is addressing the white audience as well.

The white audience is also mirrored by Valerie Wilson Wesley – on the one hand through Tamara herself by her experiences with white police men and her work as a p.i. but more efficiently through her conversations with others. In *Easier to Kill*, Tamara and Wyvetta, the owner of a beauty parlor, comment about her new cosmetologist who is a white woman:

'I was surprised when she walked in, but I sure wasn't going to turn her away because of her color. We seen too much of that shit ourselves to go and do it to somebody else.' . . . 'I did have to tell her, though, that she might have to make a couple of adjustments because of the race thing.' . . . 'And to tell the truth, I was a little worried about how my customers would take to her. You know we can get to talking about white folks pretty bad up in her sometimes. The Biscuit is a place where people have to feel free enough to say what's on their mind without hurting nobody's feelings . . . 'So what did she say?' 'Said white folks can get to talking about black folks pretty bad, too, and she always figured it cut both ways so that didn't bother her one way or the other. She fits right in. Folks say what's on their minds, and she even puts in her two cents worth every now and then. Good times and bad men don't know no color, and Petula Lincoln has seen her share of both.' (71-73).

Although Wyvetta talks to Tamara, her comments address the reader as well. The white woman is seen as the Other who enters an environment that does not belong to her. But at the same time, the white reader is comforted by the white woman's benevolent integration into the black world of the beauty salon; no reverse discrimination is pursued, rather the thought of liberal humanity is embraced. Tamara as the character and narrator allows the white reader to see the discriminating forms of racism but at the same time to ignore them and rest on the universal forms of injustice that can affect all of us. Wesley herself confirms her strategy in an interview with the *Berner Zeitung*:

Ich glaube, dass sich die Leute einfach mit einem Buch identifizieren. Wenn man einmal in der Geschichte drin steckt, vergisst man, was für eine Hautfarbe die Protagonisten haben. . . . Die Brutalität der Polizei trifft alle,

ohne Rücksicht auf die Hautfarbe. Wenn es mich als schwarze Frau trifft, kann es auch dich als weisse Frau einmal treffen, oder dich als weissen Mann. (“Wesley“, 25 July 1998).

Wesley thus gives the reader the freedom to explore a part of the black experience; the reviewer Michael Bengel mentioned in the *Nürnberger Nachrichten* that it almost seemed as if Tamara tells the stories in order to understand herself: “Und das liegt wesentlich an ihrer Detektivin, die als Erzählerin nicht glänzen will, sondern die nur erzählt, um diese ihre Welt erst einmal selber zu verstehen” (“Sündenpfehl”, 16 April 2003). Thus, Wesley avoids being didactic and preaching to the reader which is something Neely has in particular been criticized for: “Blanche often sermonizes on social topics ... [sometimes] in a rather heavy-handed educational manner ...” (Müller); a reader commented: “After I accepted the essential ‘preachiness’ that comes along with trying to make a point, I was able to get into the actual mystery” (“Not as good as ...”, www.amazon.com). However, the “freedom to explore” another culture might easily allow the reader the “freedom to ignore” the challenges and ambiguities which texts provide and to focus solely on the investigation of the crime.

As Walton and Jones have noted, it cannot be assumed that all consumers of popular literature read actively and constructively and thus are able to resist dominant ideology (76-77), moreover, Reddy considers “conscious resistance ... far more difficult than passive absorption.” (189). The impact of the changes which Neely and Wesley among other ethnic writers have introduced to the genre, then, “depends on the reader’s ability to recognize difference between this particular performance of the genre and those it both repeats and counters” (Walton/Jones 96).

Concerning the reading of the "black experience" and race in particular, Sommer refers to the concept of the "ideal reader" as a reader from a white or mainstream culture with "readerly tact" (Linton 23) who refrains from the "will to knowledge" which is both "a product and a means to sustain social power" (Linton 22; Sommer "Textual" 142). "Ideal reading", then, means to refrain from authority, to accept whiteness as the Other, and, consequently, to distinguish present realities of racism from the injustice or hostility white people are also likely to face.²⁰ The ignorance of this distinction leads to the assumption that the black experience of racism could be classified as a "universal" type of injustice which, then, fails to explain the contemporary mechanisms of the US-American social and class structures.

However, the dilemma for the white reader is best expressed by Minrose Gwin: "I am the 'we' of black and white women and the 'we' of white women." (23). She urges us to change our "white" reading strategies and accept us as the object of black women's subjectivity: "I want to be able to really hear black women and to hear black women I must confront, and *read*, my otherness in their texts, however painful that may be" (ibid.). With regard to detective fiction, the pursuance of such a reading seems to be more difficult because the detective genre has long been a traditional white genre which has reproduced and maintained white cultural hegemony: "... whiteness is the norm (and the ideal); the norm requires no comment; whiteness therefore is not commented on in white-authored crime fiction; readers of that fiction are not asked to consider whiteness consciously; the normativity of whiteness thus is validated and reproduced; ..." (Reddy 115-116).

²⁰ Compare with Maureen Reddy, p. 160.

It can be said that in Neely's as well as in Wesley's detective novels whiteness is not the norm and that white readers – if they want to – can discover and accept themselves as the Other in these texts. The importance of such a “submissive reading” is to acknowledge difference and at the same time to see its universal features.

What qualifies a text by a black author to be a presentation of the “black experience” is to which extent the text contains the black vernacular and, moreover, how it sets up distances and barriers to white understanding and thus to authority and power about the text. Both, Barbara Neely and Valerie Wilson Wesley have not only created truly African-American female detectives, but also have found a way of portraying whites as the “Other”, though to a different degree. Whereas Neely's portrait of the white middle and upper class is antagonistic and her portrait of Blanche leans toward an Afrocentrist perspective, Wesley created in Tamara a character who is looking for balance between blacks and whites. Thus, the series differ in their presentation of the black experience which seems to be more intense in the *Blanche White Mysteries*. This difference seems to reflect the divergence within the black community, in the sense that black people do not represent a homogenous group and that consequently black literature is not all-encompassing and all-inviting. The authors of both the series, however, achieved through their protagonists a way of giving black women a voice which also reaches beyond the black community into the mainstream culture and thus into universality.

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