Simen Haglund

African American Hardboiled Detective Fiction

A Look at African American Contributions to the Hardboiled Detective Genre

Master's thesis in English Literature
Supervisor: Domhnall Mitchell
May 2022

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Abstract

Crime fiction is one of the most popular forms of literature. Detectives such as Sherlock Holmes, Hercule Poirot, Philip Marlowe, and Sam Spade, are household names. In Scandinavia, there is also a strong tradition of crime writing. Crime fiction would appear to be among the most socially relevant kinds of writing – if one measures "relevance" by levels of consumption, which reflect a widespread interest. But the present era is one where we are more and more critically aware of what it means to be "relevant" – who is it that gets to define what "relevance" is, and for whom? In particular, we have become more conscious of the importance of diversity and inclusivity – that cultural spaces like any other public spaces should be open to women, people of colour, and LGBTQ+ communities and individuals. In this thesis, I look at African American contributions to American detective fiction, and primarily the tradition of the hardboiled investigator. I trace the emergence of African American presences within this genre, looking first at the writing of Chester Himes, widely acknowledged as among the first major contributors, and then at Walter Mosley to see how Black male writers insert themselves into this particular tradition of mystery writing, and what – if any – changes they make to its conventions and worldview.

Sammendrag

Kriminallitteratur er en av de mest populære formene for litteratur. Sherlock Holmes, Hercule Poirot, Philip Marlowe, og Sam Spade er velkjente navn. Det er også en sterk tradisjon i Skandinavia for kriminallitteratur. Kriminallitteratur ser ut til å være blant de mest sosialt relevante formene for litteratur – hvis man måler «relevans» ut fra forbruksnivå, noe som reflekterer en stor interesse. Men samtiden er en tid hvor vi er mer og mer kritisk klar over hva det vil si å være «relevant» – hvem er det som får definere hva «relevans» er, og for hvem? Spesielt har vi blitt mer bevisste på betydningen av mangfold og inkludering – at kulturelle rom som alle andre offentlige rom skal være åpne for kvinner, fargede og LGBTQ+-samfunn og enkeltpersoner. I denne oppgaven ser jeg på det afroamerikanske bidraget til amerikansk detektivfiksjon, og først og fremst den hardkokte detektiv tradisjonen. Jeg sporer fremveksten av afroamerikanske forekomst i denne sjangeren, ser først på forfatterskapet til Chester Himes, allment anerkjent som en av de første store bidragsyterne, og deretter på Walter Mosley for å finne ut hvordan svarte mannlige forfattere setter seg inn i denne spesielle tradisjonen av mysterieskriving, og hvilke – om noen – endringer de gjør i dets konvensjoner og verdenssyn.

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African American Hardboiled Detective Fiction

Crime fiction is one of the most popular forms of literature.[1] English detectives such as Miss Marple and Hercule Poirot, and Philip Marlowe and Sam Spade from the United States, are household names in many countries, partly because of translations. Both film and TV adaptations have made these detectives recognizable even for people who would not necessarily read the novels. In Scandinavia as well, there is a strong tradition of crime writing, with multiple authors published in English.[2] Even older works such as André Bjerke's *The Lake of the Dead* (1942) (*De Dødes Tjern* in the original Norwegian) are being republished because of the popularity of Scandinavian crime fiction.[3] Authors such as Stieg Larsson (1954 -2004) and Joe Nesbø (1960-) have not only been translated but also adapted into films such as *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo* (Fincher, 2011), and *The Snowman* (Alfredson, 2017).

Crime fiction, then, would appear to be among the most socially relevant kinds of writing – if one measures "relevance" by levels of consumption, which reflect a widespread interest. But the present era is one where we are more and more critically aware of what it means to be "relevant" – who is it that gets to define what "relevance" is, and for whom? In particular, we have become more conscious of the importance of diversity and inclusivity – that cultural spaces like any other public spaces should be open to women, people of colour, and LGBTQ+ communities and individuals. In this thesis, I want to look at African American contributions to American detective fiction, and primarily the tradition of the hardboiled investigator. I will trace the emergence of African American presences within this genre, looking first at the writing of Chester Himes (1909-1984), widely acknowledged as among the first major contributors, and then at Walter Mosley (1952-) to see how Black male writers insert themselves into this particular tradition of mystery writing, and what – if any – changes

[1] Crime and thriller novels sold 18.7 million copies in Britain in 2017: https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-43726366, and during the pandemic there was a boom in sales of novels after bookstores opened their doors again, especially crime and thriller novels: https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/jul/07/fiction-boom-as-book-sales-rocket-past-2019-levels
[2] Examples of Scandinavian crime-authors that have been translated into English, and an example book from each: Jo Nesbø (*Phantom*, 2012), Stieg Larsson (*The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo*, 2005), Jussi Adler-Olsen (*Journal 64*, 2010), Samuel Bjørk (*The Boy in the Headlights*, 2018), Anne Holt (*1222*, 2007), Lars Kepler (*The Sandman*, 2012).
[3] It is due for release later in 2022. For more details see: https://www.valancourtbooks.com/the-lake-of-the-dead-1942.html

they make to its conventions and worldview. [4] But before I begin, I need to provide an overview of what crime fiction is – its origins and development.

Crime Fiction: A Brief History

Strictly speaking, stories about crime and its detection begin, well, at the beginning. The account in Genesis, of how Adam and Eve (and especially the latter, which I will return to later) broke the first ever commandment and were expelled from Eden, is a model for many other stories; the couple is tempted to break the law and do so; their subsequent behaviour leads to their crime being discovered; they are punished. In fact, crime and punishment are the engines that drive a lot of later writing about crime – including the infamous Newgate Calendar, which told the stories of crimes, convictions, and executions from the early 1800s onwards (Newgate was a prison in London), (British Library, n.d.; Johnson, n.d.).

The rise of newspapers in the 1800s, made cheaper and more accessible through technological advances in paper manufacturing, printing, and transport, combined with increasing levels of literacy, made "true crime" stories more widely available, and such sensational accounts were very popular (Flanders, 2014). As early as 1827, Thomas De Quincey in "On Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts" described a society of "Murder-Fanciers" who devoured "the police annals of Europe" and traced this interest back to a series of two brutal murders alleged to have been committed by John Williams in the Docklands of London in 1811 (Quincey, 2004). In addition to ballads and "broadsides" about murders, there were "penny dreadfuls", and melodramas which re-enacted them – including *The Murder of Maria Marten*, about the murder of Maria Marden by William Corder (National Library of Scotland, 2004).[5] Marden's murderer was not caught immediately, so public interest was partly in how he had been captured – and this interest in the identification and pursuit of the killer was to become one of the characteristics of future crime fiction. In the same year that De Quincey's essay was published, Sir Robert Peel established the Metropolitan Police Act, which "set up the first disciplined police force for the Greater London area," and today novels, television programmes and films based on police force

[4] In using the terms African American and Black, I follow the recommendations of The California State University, an institution which in turn adopts the guidelines of the Association Press: https://www.calstate.edu/csu-system/csu-branding-standards/editorial-style-guide/Pages/diversity-style-guide.aspx#black. However, it should be noted that different sites have different practices: the Purdue Online Writing Lab states that Black should not be capitalised, for instance. I am aware that African American and Black are not necessarily synonymous: a "person may identify as Afro-Latino or Afro-Caribbean, for instance, or Haitian American or Jamaican American." (UIOWA, 2022) But both the world of *Devil in a Blue Dress* and *Rage in Harlem,* these distinctions are not observed, though some characters are sometimes described as having a lighter skin colour than others.

[5] For definitions of broadside and penny dreadful see Appendix 1.

investigations of crime are known as "police procedurals" (Gash, 2022).[6] Over the course of the nineteenth century, public interest in murder then widens to include not just the investigation but the principal investigator, and it is these men (and later women) who give rise to the detective or mystery novel as it is known today.

The *fictional* detective story in English is generally agreed to have begun with Edgar Allan Poe's short story "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," published in 1841.[7] The defining characteristics of such works as these include a problem, namely a murder, a mystery, to be solved (and the drama of the work lies in the fear that further murders may be committed, so that there is a sense of danger); secondly, we follow a detective, not necessarily a professional detective, whose investigation uncovers a number of clues that are shared with the reader, but which are not always easy to understand; thirdly, his investigation reveals that there is (or are) a suspect or suspects who will appear to be guilty of the crime or of something else that they are unwilling to disclose (and who are sometimes accused, interrogated, or arrested for the crime, adding to the drama); fourthly, the criminal is revealed in a surprising denouement. These stories are less about the crime and criminal, and more about the ingenuity and personality of the chief investigator.

Most detective fiction provide solutions to the mysteries that are fairly logical and not supernatural – indeed, in 1929, the second of the "Ten Commandments of Detective Fiction" drawn up by Ronald Knox was that all "supernatural or preternatural agencies are ruled out as a matter of course." (Malmgren, 2001, p.33). The methods of the detectives in detective fiction are an important part of the genre, because solving the crime by finding information and connecting it is a large part of its appeal. One of the terms introduced by Poe (in his second story about C. Auguste Dupin, "The Mystery of Marie Rogêt") was his theory of "ratiocination" – the process of exact or scientific reasoning in an investigation.[8] Using logic to solve crimes is something that is synonymous with the classic detective genre.

In early detective fiction, the term "whodunits" becomes synonymous with the genre as the main focus seems to be on the central mystery of who has committed the deed that is

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[6] For a definition of police procedural see Appendix 1.

[7] Detective stories in other languages, including Norwegian, begin earlier: *Mordet på Maskinbygger Roolfsen* (The Murder of Machine Builder Roolfsen) by Maurits Hansen, was published in 1839 and is a Norwegian detective story that precedes Poe's work. But it has many of the characteristics of the genre; a crime; initial focus on suspects who appear guilty but are not; the gradual discovery of clues that are shared with the reader, and correctly interpreted by the investigator, who is central; the realistic depiction of a social environment – a distinct class of people, and a place; the unveiling of the criminal, who is often a trusted member of the community (Fretheim, n.d.).

[8] For more on this, see J. Gerard Kennedy, "The Limits of Reason: Poe's Deluded Detectives" *American Literature*, 47(2) (May, 1975), 184-96.

being investigated, which is given precedence over other aspects of the story which might otherwise be seen as important in novels, such as character development or emotional complexity. This is one of the disadvantages of the formula: we cannot have too much insight into the minds of the characters, because then the solution to the crime would be too obvious. But this does not mean that detective fiction cannot be complex, because the interest is often on human nature, on upbringing, on the relationship between social and personal identity, on crime and punishment, all of which are meaningful topics for fiction.

The American Scene and This Thesis

Many of the remarks made earlier about the rise of detective fiction in the United Kingdom also apply, on an even greater scale, to the United States. America was still, in the 1800s, a relatively new and fast-growing country, but as it expanded, in terms of population and territory, a demand for literature that reflected social and political realities and urban settings there, began to rise (Agnew, 2018, p.22). Again, it was the development of cheaper paper, printing, and transport which enabled American newspapers and magazines to reach out to an American public hungry for sensation. From the broadsides and penny dreadfuls that also circulated in America during the 1700s and 1800s, there emerged in the second half of the 1800s and early 1900s what are known as pulp novels and magazines: these got their names from the fact that "the pages were made from the cheapest grade of pulpwood paper", and they sold for very low prices to large numbers of readers (Agnew, 2018, p.3). They were particularly *American* because (especially after the Civil War) they focused on Western themes, featuring tough, independent, and morally simple characters in lawless, *wilderness or frontier*, settings, and (especially after the First World War) on what came to be known as hardboiled detectives, featuring tough, independent, and morally simple characters in lawless, *urban*, settings (Agnew, 2018, pp. 64-65). [9]

The origins of hardboiled detective fiction are often traced to weekly magazines such as the *Black Mask* in the 1920s.[10] In the issue of 15 May, 1923, the magazine published what is considered to be the first ever hardboiled detective story: "Three Gun Terry" by Carroll John Daly.

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[9] The value of Pulp Magazines and similar content has been questioned many times, from Anthony Comstock (1844-1915) to the 1954 Comics Code, to the panic surrounding hip hop and videogames in the late 1990s (Bedore, 2013, p.5). Comstock sums up the general fear in this quote: "[Exposure] to immoral materials […] could be linked directly to adolescent criminality, citing as evidence numerous cases in which young boys who had committed crimes were also readers of newspapers and popular fiction" (Bedore, 2013, p.6).

[10] This statement is widely considered accurate by most accounts: "[The] hardboiled ethos, whose origin is placed in the *Black Mask* magazines of the American 1920s by scholars of various theoretical persuasions." (Bedore, 2013, p.20)

> "I have a little office which says 'Terry Mack, Private Investigator,' on the door […] I ain't a crook, and I ain't a dick. I play the game on the level, in my own way." (Black Mask Magazine, 2021)

Both the authors I discuss in the opening of the next section had connections to *Black Mask*: Dashiell Hammett (1894–1961), whose first story ("The Road Home") appeared there in 1922, and Raymond Chandler (1888–1959), whose "Blackmailers Don't Shoot" followed in 1933 (Hagemann, 1981; Valerio, 2017).[11]

The tropes and patterns that emerged in *Black Mask* have been written about extensively. The writers and editors of a variety of introductions to the genre, including Julian Symons' classic *Bloody Murder: From the Detective Story to the Crime Novel* (1972); Herbert et. al, *The Oxford Companion to Crime and Mystery Writing* (1999); Lee Horsley's *The Noir Thriller* (2001); and Martin Priestman, *The Cambridge Companion to Crime Fiction* (2003), outline a number of conventions that are central to the hardboiled form: it often portrayed a world full of institutionalized social corruption and violence; it brought a tone of realism to detective fiction; it often has "graphic sex and violence" in its content and is set in a "sordid urban background"; the heroes or anti-heroes of this type of fiction are often White males, which impacts how these stories are written (Soumya, 2017). [12]

[11] For a short biography of Hammett and Chandler and their relevance see Appendix 2.

[12] Most introductions to hardboiled fiction describe similar aspects as important, and most reference Chandler's essay on Hammett and hardboiled writing "The Simple Art of Murder": hardboiled fiction as realistic detective fiction is the major point of the essay (Chandler, 1988, pp. 1-18). "Chandler's view that a writer striving for realism" (Herbert, 1999, p.12). Furthermore, hardboiled writers are: "up to expose the violence, disorder, and transgression of the world that they inhabit. Drawing on the fears and anxieties of contemporary readers, hard-boiled writers from Dashiell Hammett to Walter Mosley, Didier Daeninckx, and Ian Rankin respond to the dilemmas of their times in ways that are specific to their culture" (Gorrara 2003, p.593). This notion is also repeated in Priestman and Symons (Priestman, 2003, p.96; Symons, 1972, p.135). Lee Horsley has her own understanding of what she calls "Noir" which is essentially a definition of hardboiled detective fiction: the most notable points are "(i) the subjective point of view; (ii) the shifting roles of the protagonist; (iii) the ill-fated relationship between the protagonist and society (generating the themes of alienation and entrapment); and (iv) the ways in which noir functions as a socio-political critique." (Horsley, 2001, p.8).

What would such a story look like with a Black lead? In this thesis, I look at *A Rage in Harlem* (1957) by Chester Himes, widely regarded as the first major work of hardboiled fiction by an African American author, as a sort of bridging point between the standard White hero of hardboiled fiction, and the later work of Walter Mosley, author of *Devil in a Blue Dress* (1990).[13] I examine both writers in relation to the conventions of the detective story - a single male lead, who is not a police officer but an investigator who exists in between the legal and illegal, but is concerned with justice; someone who has an eye for details (of clothing, appearance, dialogue, setting, behaviour, motivation), and is therefore a reliable narrator and protagonist; someone who is often tempted by a dubious female character and distracted from his quest to solve the case; someone who is often amusing (and thus intelligent, quick-witted); someone who can handle himself in a fight, but who can also take a beating; someone for whom solving a case is a point of honour; someone who operates in a recognizable urban environment which is realistically conveyed and ask how these conventions are maintained (if at all), revised and developed by these African American novelists?

In writing my thesis, I will use Cawelti's study of the hardboiled genre as a grid, a map, by which to explore the literary territories established by Himes and Mosley, while also referring to a variety of other secondary sources, and perform a series of close readings of my chosen texts, using the techniques associated with practical and new criticism.[14]

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[13] Himes is not the first African American to write detective fiction, as that title would go to Pauline Elizabeth Hopkins' *Hagar's Daughter* (1901-1902) (a serial novel published in *Colored American Magazine*), despite many believing that the first African American detective novel being *The Conjure-Man Dies* (1932) by Rudolph Fisher (Soitos, 1996, p.60). But he is still important as a continuation (and abbreviation) of the hardboiled detective genre, most notably applied by Hammett and Chandler, and to understand Mosley who is rooted in the same tradition (Soitos, 1996, p.125).

[14] For definitions of practical, or applied, criticism and new criticism see Appendix 1.

Hammett, Chandler, & Himes

The Thin Man and *The Big Sleep* as Defined by Cawelti

John G. Cawelti's *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance* (1976) is one of the finest treatments of popular, formulaic, literature. Cawelti is useful because he understands hardboiled detective fiction as a genre, a particular kind of story with a recognizable set of patterns and rules – and even compares these to sports, in the sense that the rules and patterns are defined, but one game/work of literature will differ from another due to individual factors that can affect the performance and outcome. (Cawelti, 1976, p.19)

To Cawelti it is the setting, the characters, and the basic plots that are the building blocks of hardboiled detective fiction. The plots are closely related to the more classical detective fiction of the 1800s, but the engine of the story is its adventure aspects more than the mystery, which seems to be the underlying archetype of classic detective fiction (Cawelti, 1976, p.142).[15] The classic detective fiction concerns itself with the protagonist's intellectual work in solving a mystery that the protagonist has an emotional distance to, and at stake is not the survival of the main characters, but the solution to the mystery.

The first part of **the plot** is what Cawelti calls "the rhythm of exposure" (p.147), meaning simply that things are not what they seem. The detective is hired to carry out an apparently simple task, for instance a missing persons case, but then stumbles upon dead bodies, which expose the criminal underbelly of the city. The clues in the case lead the investigator back to the (often wealthy) people who hired him, and it becomes clear that there is some sort of connection between the wealthy and criminal classes. The case has by this point changed character, in the sense that the trivial task that was the first goal is now not the main goal. Finding the person or solving the mystery is no longer enough: rather, the main character needs to expose what lies beneath and take an ethical stance.

The second part of the plot focuses on the detective's personal involvement in the case. He is emotionally invested in some way, and the first person that dies is usually someone the detective knows, or at least sympathises with. After the change in the goal, the detective may need to break with the client that he works for. Because of his personal involvement and his code of honour, he does not find this difficult (Cawelti, 1976, p.143-148).

[15] S.S. Van Dine (an accomplished detective writer in his own right) described twenty rules for detective fiction in 1928 (not considering hardboiled detective fiction). However, some of the points are still applicable to hardboiled detective fiction, such as "Everything must be explained rationally" which suggests a need for realism, and the point on the need for "at least one victim". (Tzvetan, 2010, p.298)

The Thin Man (1934) is Hammett's final novel, and features ex-private detective Nick Charles and his wife Nora.[16] Nick and his socialite wife Nora have moved to California, but on a visit to old friends in New York, they learn about the disappearance of Clyde Wynant, an eccentric inventor and Nick's former client, and the murder of his secretary. Nora finds the situation exciting and persuades Nick to come out of retirement. The story is set during Prohibition,[17] but that does not stop the characters in the novel from drinking a lot in typical hardboiled fashion.

The Big Sleep (1939) is one of the most prototypical examples of hardboiled detective fiction, from the characters, to the setting, and the plot (at least according to the genre tropes outlined by Cawelti). Marlowe is employed by the wealthy General Sternwood, whose daughter Carmen's behaviour has led to him being blackmailed by Arthur Geiger. Geiger owns a bookstore which is a front for a pornography racket. We also learn early that Sternwood's son-in-law, husband of his daughter Vivian, has gone missing.

The rhythm of exposure is typical in both novels, except that Nick is not hired as such, and his first task is to solve a murder and disappearance, while not wanting to get involved to begin with. But although the first task is not trivial, it is presented in a light tone, with Nick explaining to Nora that the police most likely are able to solve the case without his help: "'Darling,' I said, 'my guess is that Wynant killed her, and the police'll catch him without my help.'" (Hammett, 1934, p.13).

Both novels have central mysteries that change character over the course of the stories, which is a characteristic of hardboiled plots. The endings are cynical and dark, which is also a common feature.[18] However, Nick is not as psychologically tormented by the outcome of the mystery as would be the norm. His outlook on life and ethics have not been challenged. To Nick, the mystery may be solved, but the world will not change.

> Nothing new. They'll go on being Mimi and Dorothy and Gilbert just as you and I will go on being us and the Quinns will go on being the Quinns. Murder doesn't round out anybody's life except the murdered's and sometimes the murderer's. (Hammett, 1934, p.223)

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[16] *The Thin Man* is not the most famous novel by Hammett, as that title arguably goes to *The Maltese Falcon* (1929), but it is a more unconventional hardboiled detective novel: its break with conventions in a way makes it easier to see what these conventions are.

[17] For a definition of prohibition see Appendix 1.

[18] *The Thin Man* has been criticized for being darker than contemporary hardboiled detective stories (Thompson, 2006, p.134).

For Marlowe on the other hand, when his mystery is solved, he is shaken up and in need of a drink.

> On the way downtown I stopped at a bar and had a couple of double Scotches. They didn't do me any good. All they did was make me think of Silver-Wig, and I never saw her again. (Chandler, 1939, p.251)[19]

The setting of hardboiled detective fiction is often a well-known city with identifiable landmarks and districts, but with hidden areas of corruption where the wealthy and the criminal classes mix, and the police are either unwilling or unable to intervene. Women occupy liminal roles in the setting. Their importance is defined by the company they keep, the connections they make, and their main weapon is their sexuality. Hardboiled detective fiction often portrays the city as a dark place, and at its best, such depictions can be as atmospheric as gothic novels (Cawelti, 1976, p.156).

The setting in *The Thin Man* is not realised so much through descriptions, which contrasts with Chandler, Himes, and Mosley, but rather through the characters that occupy that space. Unlike Hammett's New York, Los Angeles in *The Big Sleep* feels more expansive. Marlowe moves around a lot more than Nick, which gives the reader a greater scope of the city. Chandler's expressive descriptions also make Los Angeles more like a real place than Hammett's New York. A unique aspect of Chandler's Los Angeles is that unlike the sunny warm weather that most people associate with the city, this Los Angeles is wet, cloudy, and cold.[20]

> "It was going to rain soon. There was pressure in the air already." (Chandler, 1939, p.16)

[19] Silver-Wig is a woman who Marlowe clearly is very attracted to: "Her eyes were the blue of mountain lakes. Overhead the rain still pounded, with a remote sound, as if it was somebody else's rain. 'How do you feel?' It was a smooth silvery voice that matched her hair. It had a tiny tinkle in it, like bells in a doll's house. I thought that was silly as soon as I thought of it." (Chandler, 1939, pp. 207-208)

[20] *Devil in a Blue Dress* differentiates itself from these descriptions of LA in favour of a more usual depiction. The moody atmosphere that is evoked by describing bad weather is lacking, but the juxtaposition of Los Angeles, which is typically a sunny place, with the crimes that are committed throughout the novel is stark, arguably making them even more gritty in comparison. This makes the moral code of Easy even more comparably admirable.

> "Rain filled the gutters and splashed knee-high off the pavement." (Chandler, 1939, p.32)
> "The memory of the rain was still cold on my face." (Chandler, 1939, p.203)

It is raining so much that in just 252 pages, rain or raining is mentioned 64 times.[21]

Hammett's New York is a cold and hostile place where deception is central (its lack of diversity is something I will come back to when writing about Mosley): hiding the truth, which is an aspect of all detective fiction, is taken to an extreme, so that characters will lie for no apparent reason, because it is often characterised as trivial (even amusing). To the characters in *The Thin Man,* deception is not just something that is done to keep people in the dark, but also a way of life, and we never know if the information we are given is correct to such an extent that the author André Gide summarized the novel as made up of "dialogues, in which every character is trying to deceive all the others and in which the truth slowly becomes visible through a fog of deception." (Thompson, 2006, p.28). George Grella comments that this behaviour implies "an urban chaos, devoid of spiritual and moral values, pervaded by viciousness and random savagery." (Thompson, 2006, p.188). The characters, and their problems, weave an intricate pattern that presents us with a modern society that is dysfunctional and morally lax, which is further illustrated by the police's need for Nick to solve the crime.[22]

Furthermore, money and resources seem to be an important aspect in the world of *The Big Sleep*. Sean McCann has argued that the novel is an allegory of economic predation in which the financial elite prey upon people around them (McCann, 2000, p.166). According to McCann, the most obvious image of this predation comes in the form of Carmen Sternwood, who is a murderer and, also described as a predatory figure with small sharp teeth (Chandler,

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[21] The dilapidated state of the city that mirrors the dilapidated state of the ethics in the city is also an aspect that is used throughout Chandler's work here exemplified in descriptions of oil fields that used to be functional: "Then the oil-stained, motionless walking-beam of a squat wooden derrick stuck up over a branch. I could see the rusty old steel cable that connected this walking-beam with half a dozen others. The beams didn't move, probably hadn't moved for a year. The wells were no longer pumping. There was a pile of rusted pipe, a loading platform that sagged at one end, half a dozen empty oil drums lying in a ragged pile." (Chandler, 1939, p.237), but also exemplified in the descriptions earlier in the novel of the Fulwider Building: "[An] once-guilt elevator. There was a tarnished and well-missed spittoon on a gnawed rubber mat. A case of false teeth hung on the mustard-coloured wall like a fuse box in a screen porch. I shook the rain off my hat and looked at the building directory beside the case of teeth. […] Plenty of vacancies or plenty of tenants who wished to remain anonymous. Painless dentists, shyster detective agencies, small sick businesses that had crawled there to die […] A building in which the smell of stale cigar butts would be the cleanest odour." (Chandler, 1939, p.185).

[22] Hammett commented that a society with a need for private detectives has questionable values, which could be an argument for why his depiction of the socialites in New York is this bleak (Thompson, 2006, p.176).

1939, p.3).[23] Just like the setting in *The Thin Man*, the characters in the story of *The Big Sleep* are products and extensions of their environments.[24]

The characters in a hardboiled detective story are divided into five types. We have a hero, the villain, the victim, the *femme fatale*, and "those involved in the crime but incapable of resolving the problems it poses" (Cawelti, 1976, p.147). The hardboiled detective is often a cynical and a lonely figure, who can both take and give a beating: however, when he fights someone, it is strictly for the people who deserve it. Furthermore, he is an attractive man, and often the object of attempted seductions meant to distract him (Cawelti, 1976, p.144-153).[25]

The characters in *The Thin Man* are despicable. Though they come from a wide range of people from the upper social class to the criminal underworld, they all seem hollow and selfish. Robert Edenbaum suggests that Hammett is trying not just to explore, but also expose the emptiness at the heart of modern society (Thompson, 2006, p.180). This is a theme not just of detective fiction, of course: think of T.S. Eliot's "The Hollow Men" (1925), about a state of spiritual vacancy interwar society generally.

One of the interesting aspects that Hammett brought to the detective genre was the moral struggle of the detective, which Chandler would later develop further. The hardboiled detective is an honest man, a knight, and a lot of the interactions in hardboiled detective novels derive their drama from a conflict between the pragmaticism, with which the detective manoeuvres through a world of deceit, and his moral code. For Cawelti, this is the essence of the protagonist. Though there is a central mystery that needs to be solved, there is just as much emphasis on personal heroism and a quest, a trial of ethics leading to a just reward, albeit at a price (Cawelti, 1976, p.142-143).

Nick is the protagonist in *The Thin Man*, and like Marlowe (the protagonist in *The Big Sleep)*, he is a private detective. Marlowe and Nick wear a suit and tie as a kind of uniform (something I will come back to in my discussion on the aesthetics of hardboiled detective fiction in the section on Mosley and *Devil in a Blue Dress*). Nick is established and stagnant,

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[23] This bestial imagery is reminiscent of the "weird sisters" in Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) "I knew the swaying round forms, the bright hard eyes, the white teeth, the ruddy colour, the voluptuous lips." ; "There was a deliberate voluptuousness which was both thrilling and repulsive, and as she arched her neck she actually licked her lips like an animal, till I could see in the moonlight the moisture shining on the scarlet lips and on the red tongue as it lapped the white sharp teeth." (Stoker, 1897, p.390 & p.45).

[24] African American representation is non-existent in the novel. However, I will come back to this point in the Mosley section. Raymond Chandler does however have more notable African American representation in *Farewell, My Lovely* (1940), which I will use later to exemplify what that representation looked like when present in what is considered the most classical hardboiled detective stories.

[25] The detective in a hardboiled detective story is a knight in shining armour, the moral centre of word compromised by corruption and greed. The knight metaphor is something not just recognized by Cawelti, but also by Terry Curtis Fox in his essay "City Knights" (Fox, 1984, pp.30-36).

with slick manners, and enough money to not care about work. His good fortune has in some sense removed his need for justice (if it was there to begin with): "Anyway, it's nothing in my life […] besides I haven't the time: I'm too busy to see that you don't lose any of the money I married you for." (Hammett, 1934, p.13)

Nick's character has also been a point of contention. David T. Bazelon is among those critics who dislike *The Thin Man*, describing Nick Charles as someone written with "deliberate unconsciousness" (Thompson, 2006, p.167). Nick's lack of motivation in solving the central mystery of the novel could be seen as a major problem for the drama of the plot. However, a lack of motivation does not intrinsically make Nick Charles a poor character.[26] His motivation is his wife, Nora: she wants to be entertained or she needs protection. Nora is Nick's companion and almost always by his side. Most of the comedic aspects of the novel ensue from the interactions between the two. However, they, just like the rest of the cast, are seen as hollow people who at times do not seem like a loving couple at all.[27] Kenney comments that "This brittle, hard-drinking, wisecracking couple seem almost as a matter of principle to avoid any direct expression of feeling for each other" (Thompson, 2006, p.171).[28]

Marlowe has more honour and will fight for justice, because it is the ethical thing to do. To say that Marlowe is a knight would be an understatement. Chandler often alludes to classical literature in his own writings, and *The Big Sleep* is akin to a 1930s working-class Arthurian legend, where Marlowe is a knight on a quest for justice. We see this very directly when Marlowe first visits the Sternwood residence, for in the main hallway over the entrance there is a stained-glass panel showing a knight rescuing a tied-up lady: "I stood there and thought that if I lived in the house, I would sooner or later have to climb up there and help him." (Chandler, 1939, p.1).

Marlowe's self-conscious ethics come clearly to the surface in his interactions with Carmen, and in his shielding the General from information - such as that Carmen killed Rusty, and her involvement with pornography and blackmail. He also resists Carmen's attempts at seduction, thus proving his chastity, another feature associated with the knight. At the same time, this setting is not medieval, as Marlowe admits at one point:

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[26] In this sense he is not unlike other characters who have lost their way in the 1930s and 1940s, such as the protagonist of Albert Camus' *Stranger* (1942), which is considered by many to be an existential masterpiece (Williams, 2016).

[27] There is even a section where it is suggested that Nick is unfaithful: "[Nora] grinned at me. 'You got types?' 'Only you, darling – lanky brunettes with wicked jaws.' 'And how about the red-head you wandered off with at the Quinns' last night?' 'That's silly,' I said. 'She just wanted to show me some French etchings.'" (Hammett, 1934, p.3)

[28] William P. Kenney feels that characterisation generally is a weakness in the novel, with the villain in particular "the most weakly drawn character in the novel." (Thompson, 2006, p.168).

> I looked down at the chessboard. The move with the knight was wrong. I put it back where I had moved it from. Knights had no meaning in this game. It wasn't a game for knights. (Chandler, 1939, p.170).

Marlowe is self-aware: he wonders if a single moral man in a corrupt society may be able to do anything of significance. This ties into one of the recurring themes that we find in hardboiled detective fiction, that the world will continue without any changes despite the moral man's efforts.

The victim as stated previously is someone with whom the detective sympathises in some way, and this differs from the more classic victims of golden age detective fiction, such as those of Agatha Christie, where the victim is quite often as heinous or objectionable as the murderer her- or himself (Cawelti, 1976, p.147). Cawelti also helpfully divides secondary characters into two types: respectable people who turn out to be corrupt, and allies who loathe corruption, and who recognize the "inherent virtue" of the detective (Cawelti, 1976, p.153).

Many of the characters in *The Big Sleep* are people that Marlowe has sympathy with. General Sternwood is a dying man who made his fortune in oil: his oil fields are also drying up.[29] Even the plants that surround the General in his greenhouse are associated with death.

> The plants filled the place, a forest of them, with nasty meaty leaves and stalks like the newly washed fingers of dead men. They smelled as overpowering as boiling alcohol under a blanket. (Chandler, 1939, p.6)[30]

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[29] The wasteland is a common motif associated with the legend of the fisher king. The story varies in detail, but the magically wounded king who spends his days fishing, in a kingdom that has become a wasteland due to his injury, are features that reoccur. The king is often described as having trouble with his leg (s), which makes the association between the General and the fisher king quite strong. The desolation of the wasteland is also often explained as being "connected with the death of a knight" (Weston, 1920, p.13). The connection between the wasteland, the king, and this knight, is reminiscent of the connection between the General, his oilfields, and Rusty (son-in-law).

[30] The General's greenhouse, with all its plants, is described in a manner that is reminiscent of typical descriptions of jungles in Western literature from the late 19th and early 20th century. The jungle as a place of unease, danger, and lassitude is exemplified here in *Heart of Darkness* (1899) by Joseph Conrad: "it came in the shape of an unrestful and noisy dream [...] overwhelming realities of this strange world of plants, and water, and stillness. And this stillness of life did not in the least resemble a peace. It was the stillness of an implacable force brooding over an inscrutable intention. It looked at you with a vengeful aspect." (Condrad, 1899, pp.42-43). The forest as something opposite to morality and civilisation, is a recurring aspect of Western culture that has been explored thoroughly in Robert P. Harrison's book, *Forest: The Shadow of Civilization* (1992). The warmth of the greenhouse with the constant rain outside would make the environment arguably damp, which adds to the comparison of the greenhouse and the jungle, and to the uncomfortable atmosphere.

There are two victims in *The Thin Man,* and in typical hardboiled detective fiction fashion, the first is someone the detective has had a previous relationship with, Julia Wolf, the secretary of the missing, titular, thin man. The protagonist's previous association with the victim would often be the catalyst that starts the plot, as he feels ethically compelled to assist in finding the murderer, but this is not enough for Nick. In *The Big Sleep* the General is a broken man who is not just suffering from ill-health and blackmail, but from loneliness: his son-in-law, Rusty, has also gone missing. Rusty, an ex-bootlegger, provided the General with company and energy. Despite the General's desperation, Marlowe does not take advantage of him. All he wants is his standard twenty-five dollars a day plus gas payment. In addition to the modern armour of suit and tie, Marlowe displays the other characteristics of the knight - chivalry and nobility. He operates with a distinct code of honour, refusing to take advantage of the weak General, rejecting payment when he does not accomplish what he felt he was paid to do.

The villain is usually introduced early and (unlike the pattern of classic detective fiction), he/she is a central character throughout the story, and not hidden in plain sight. The villain in hardboiled detective fiction is often outwardly respectable, socially important, and even close to the detective. The *femme fatale* is a linked character who is also unique to the hardboiled detective genre, though of course Christie's fiction is full of female characters who turn out to be murderers. The figure of the *femme fatale* can be traced back to the biblical myth of Adam's temptation by Eve (Genesis 3:6).[31] The *femme fatale* in hardboiled detective fiction is usually a sexually attractive but duplicitous woman who seems to befriend the protagonist and to seek his protection, but puts him in ethical and physical danger (Cawelti, 1976, p.154).

Nora adds a romantic relationship to *The Thin Man*, further distancing it from the trope of the lonely sleuth, but this does not mean that the *femme fatale*, or any other sexually charged female characters, is omitted: the woman who seduces the detective and has dubious motives appear in the form of Mimi, who accepts a bribe and leads the detective in the wrong direction by saying she saw Clyde alive after he was already dead. Mimi is both seductive and manipulative, and even though Nick does not fall for any of it, she does fulfil a structural

[31] It should be noted that the Bible simply says: "She also gave to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it." (New International Version, 2011, Genesis 3:6). But in subsequent depictions (such as Raphael's sixteenth-century "Adam and Eve"), Eve's body faces the viewer naked, while Adam is sideways: the implication is that it is Eve who tempts Adam (and even the snake is given the upper body of a woman).

role. But, unlike many previous *femme fatales*, Mimi is not the main villain of the story, as that title goes to Macauley. Macauley is the antagonist and the murderer in the story.

Macauley may not be the best-drawn character, but he is interesting in the sense that there are some parallels between how he operates and Hammett himself as the author of the novel. Macauley constructs reality in the sense that he plants clues that could point to a host of possible guilty persons for the police to examine. Nick does eventually find out the truth, and Hammett makes sure there are enough clues to preserve the fair-play doctrine. However, Nick does not even care if Macauley is the real murderer when he finds out the truth.

> "You find the guy you think did the murder and you slam him in the can and let everybody know you think he's guilty […] the District Attorney builds up the best theory he can on what information you've got and meanwhile you pick up additional details here and there, and people who recognize his picture in the paper—as well as people who'd think he was innocent if you hadn't arrested him—come in and tell you things about him and presently you've got him sitting in the electric chair." (Hammett, 1934, p.216)

Carmen fits the description of the archetypical *femme fatale* in *The Big Sleep*. Carmen is an attractive, small, and very sexualised woman, who uses sex as a tool to get what she wants. She may be seen by many as childish, giggling and sucking her thump like a comforter, while seemingly having little awareness of the world around her. The sucking of the thumb is both childish and seductive- it represents the oral in all of its complex dimensions. She does not seem to have any concept of how she is adding to any problem. Despite being seemingly childish, she is also unstable and violent, hissing when she is provoked (Chandler, 1939, p.94).[32] It is possible that such actions as the giggling and sucking of the thumb are just a part of a conscious ploy to deceive. Because this pattern of action repeats itself throughout the novel, you could argue that it feels rehearsed in an effort to cover the truth. The descriptions of Carmen suggesting that she is some type of animal, further dehumanize her as a character.

> The gun pointed at my chest […] The hissing sound grew louder and her face had the scraped bone look. Aged, deteriorated, become animal, and not a nice animal. (Chandler, 1939, p.238)

[32] The hissing (like the sound of a snake) could imply the Biblical snake, thus connecting Carmen with Eve - perhaps the first *femme fatale*.

Vivian (Rusty's wife, and the General's oldest daughter) is the decoy *femme fatale* in *The Big Sleep*. She seems not to want anyone to find out what happened to Rusty. Vivian is also described as a beautiful woman, who uses her sexuality to try and seduce Marlowe. All these aspects make her seem like a *femme fatale*, but in the end, we find out that she is just trying to shelter her father from the reality of Carmen's actions: in contrast to the typical *femme fatale*, she is not motivated by self-interest and a desire to corrupt, or compromise the hero.

Himes in Harlem

A Rage in Harlem is the first hardboiled detective novel by Chester Bomar Himes (1909-1984) and the first appearance of the legendary Coffin Ed Johnson and Grave Digger Jones, who patrol New York's mostly African American neighbourhood, Harlem, in the 1950s.[33] The novel was written at the time it is about, just like *The Big Sleep* and *The Thin Man,* but, unlike those writers, Himes had never lived in the place he wrote about.[34]

The story mostly follows Jackson, making him the main character, but unlike the protagonists in more traditional hardboiled detective fiction, he is not the detective of the story. *A Rage in Harlem* is told in the third person. This apparent small change to the usual formula gives *A Rage in Harlem* a unique quality, to such an extent that it is possible to argue that it is not hardboiled detective fiction anymore. The story is clearly hardboiled (as it is tough, raw, and set in a sordid urban background), and Coffin Ed Johnson and Grave Digger Jones are both detectives. However, the change in perspective differentiates the story from the American hardboiled detective tradition, and by not primarily following the detectives, Himes distances the story from classical detective fiction as well.[35] Despite following Jackson more than any other character in the novel, the story is not limited to his perspective (we get to follow the detectives, Imabelle, and Goldy, as well).[36]

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[33] *A Rage in Harlem* is the first novel in what was to be known as the *Harlem Cycle*, which consists of nine books (the latest being published posthumously in 1992).

[34] Some critics have dismissed Himes' novels as nothing more than modernist black-humour vehicles, anti-genre grotesques, and manifestos of black rage. Stephen F. Milliken disagree, added that Himes' protest is valid, and never negatively impacted by the hardboiled detective genre. Robert E. Skinner added that Himes' detective novels "displays the unique character of Black humor that has helped this race of people survive in the modern world" (Soitos, 1996, p.127).

[35] Despite this change in voice, I consider *A Rage in Harlem* as the first instance of African American hardboiled detective fiction in this thesis, based on the popularity of that claim, and because of the influence the novel has had on the genre.

[36] Jackson is in many ways our stand-in for the knight, following in the steps of Chandler's Marlowe. Jackson is saving a metaphorical princess from a metaphorical dragon.

In the fiction of what is sometimes known as the Golden Age, writers like Christie offered both a mystery and the insight into the lives of the British upper classes; in hardboiled fiction, the mystery is presented along with an insight into the lives of those who become wealthy through industry, manufacturing, and trade- along with the criminal underworld. In both cases we are invited to see the economically superior as no less morally suspect as the criminals. With Himes, the insight is into the exotic world of African Americans - and since the book was first published in France (Himes, 1957, p.(v)), this would have been especially interesting and “other”.

Jackson is a simple man, who loves the beautiful Imabelle, who may not be as innocent as he thinks she is. Jackson ends up losing his life savings to some con men who, he is led to believe, can turn ten-dollar bills into hundreds. Jackson gets into financial trouble and Imabelle disappears. After stealing money from his employers and losing it gambling, he gets help from his cross-dressing junky brother (Goldy) to find Imabelle. The seemingly simple task that is introduced and then changed in hardboiled detective fashion is the disappearance of Imabelle (because this is the driving force of Jackson, and it leads to the other mysteries such as: the golden trunk, multiple deaths, and the distrust of Imabelle). However, the detectives are not looking for Imabelle, but rather the men who executed the initial con, because those three men are “wanted in Mississippi on a murder rap’.” (Himes, 1957, p.65). Goldy is the one who “employs” the detectives (after following them in an almost magical fashion, into a police station and out again into their “small black sedan” (p.65): “if there was anything strange about a black Sister of Mercy soliciting in a Harlem precinct prison station at one o’clock in the morning, no one remarked it.” (p.64)). The detectives are already on the case, because they work for the police, who are also looking for the murderers. This further distancing the narrative from a typical hardboiled detective story, because the detectives are not engaging with the initial disappearance of Imabelle, while also adhering to the structures of the genre, by having Jackson be the one following this initial mystery.

A Rage in Harlem has an uplifting ending, which differentiates it from its contemporaries. When Imabelle and Jackson are reunited they are redeemed. The last sentence of the novel is sweet instead of the cynical sentiment that typifies hardboiled detective fiction: “Who cares about an old trunk full of gold ore, as long as I got you?” (Himes, 1957, p.211)

The setting in *A Rage in Harlem*, just as in *The Thin Man* and *The Big Sleep,* is cold and gloomy: "Snow was falling on the ice-locked piles of garbage stretching like levees along the gutters as far as the eye could see." (Himes, 1957, p.2)

Just like *The Thin Man* and *The Big Sleep,* the setting is a major city, but unlike them it is not a whole city, but a segregated part of New York, or a city within the city.[37] The people in Harlem are primarily African American, and apart from some of the policemen in the novel, there are not many White people in general.[38] Though hardboiled fiction is often seen as a form of heightened realism, the setting and the plot in *A Rage in Harlem* seem absurd at times. Himes has stated that he thought he was writing realism but that he recognised the absurdity of the novel when pointed out to him: "Realism and absurdity are so similar in the lives of American blacks one cannot tell the difference." ((*My life of absurdity*, 1992) from Himes, 1957, p.viii).[39]

The absurdities are often amusing, but when thought about on a deeper level can be seen as upsetting. As Stephen Soitos argues "The extreme behavior of Himes' black characters" is a product of the "serious fact that racism completely controls their lives." (Soitos, 1996, p.126).

African American culture is apparent not just in the characters, but also in other aspects of the story, such as the language used, and the food they eat. *A Rage in Harlem* contains characters eating what is known today as soul food, specifically pig's feet (Himes, 1957, p.47). Soul food is associated with African American cuisine, and even though the term itself was first used in 1964, before *A Rage in Harlem* was published, it is no doubt that this tradition of food goes back to the emancipation of slaves in the 1860s.[40] The use of every part of a pig is a known part of the soul food repertoire (Wolff, 2020). The integral religious aspects of the South are also present in Goldy dressing as a nun, to the inhabitants of Harlem who "take their religion seriously." (Himes, 1957, p.32). This religious aspect is also reflected in the plot. Jackson's belief in Imabelle (and others) is seen as a positive virtue, and also a flaw, as it gets Jackson into trouble, but also out of it. But there is more to this than a very American belief in the essential goodness of humanity: the spiritual aspects of the novel

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[37] For a definition of segregation see Appendix 1

[38] It could be argued that Jackson's boss, Mr. Clay, is White, as he is described as having "skin like parchment" and having "long gray bushy hair" (Himes, 1957, p.9), however, he could also be a light-skinned African American, and because Harlem was primarily inhabited by African Americans it does not have to be explicitly stated that he was an African American.

[39] An example of surrealistic things that can be found in Himes' Harlem is: "Colored women […] sporting coats of such unlikely fur as horse, bear, buffalo, cow, dog, cat and even bat." (Himes, 1957, p.76)

[40] For a definition of emancipation see Appendix 1.

also include Goldy's ability to shape shift, to turn into someone of another gender, which is very close to the Trickster tradition in African American oral culture (Eidt, 2013).[41]

> If Goldy had taken off in a flaming chariot and galloped straight to heaven, they would have believed it – the godly and the sinners alike. (Himes, 1957, p.32)

Unlike *The Big Sleep* and *The Thin Man*, *A Rage in Harlem* does not begin with the hardboiled detectives: they come into the novel quite late (about one-fourth of the way through). This means that by the time we are introduced to Coffin Ed Johnson and Grave Digger Jones, we are already aware of what type of world these characters inhabit. Unlike traditional hardboiled detective fiction, where we follow an outsider into a foreign world of corruption, we see Coffin Ed Johnson and Grave Digger Jones as a part of the world, for they belong just as much to Harlem as the rest of the inhabitants. This ties into the importance of community, which is also reflected in the fact that we have two equal partners as our hardboiled detectives, which sets the characters apart from previous partnerships in detective fiction.

We first meet Coffin Ed Johnson and Grave Digger Jones as they work as security guards outside a club. They are not described, but their pistols are (Himes, 1957, p.54), and their violent nature is such that people in Harlem believe that they would kill a man "for not standing straight in line" (Himes, 1957, p.54). Previous hardboiled detectives have used violence, but the intimidating reputation of this pair is different. Coffin Ed Johnson and Grave Digger Jones are tough, but they adhere to a moral code just like their investigative forbears:

> They took their tribute […] from the established underworld catering to the essential needs of the people – gamekeepers, madams, streetwalkers, numbers writers, numbers bankers. But they were rough on purse snatchers, muggers, burglars, con men, and all strangers working any rackets. (Himes, 1957, p.62)

The most notable aspect of this moral code is how Coffin Ed and Grave Digger Jones differentiate between crimes: the criminals they are hardest on are the ones most likely to hurt

[41] Robert E. Skinner argues that Goldy possesses some magical talents, as he disguises himself as a woman to travel safely in the dangerous underworld of Himes' Harlem (Skinner, 1989, p.74).

someone. The exception may be the "strangers", and this alertness to strangers suggests that in a way they are protecting locals from predators, from outside the local African American community.

Imabelle is the token *femme fatale* of the story. She is described as beautiful and uses her sexuality to lead Jackson astray. The importance of Jackson and Imabelle's relationship is reflected not just in the story, but also in the different titles of the novel. *A Rage in Harlem* was published in French at the same time as it was published in English (Himes lived in Paris at the time). The name of the French version of the book is *La Reine des Pommes,* which according to Luc Sante translates to "the Queen of fools".[42] In English, the book was published under the name *For Love of Imabelle* (Himes, 1957, p.53).

What Himes ultimately achieves in his writing is using hardboiled detective fiction to explore not just a corrupt system, but how American slavery and its legacy have impacted the African American way of life. Exemplified in the poor conditions that the characters live in, their distrust of government (police) and outsiders who want to hurt them, and the sense of otherness that permeate throughout the novel (Harlem, because of segregation, acts as a place outside of New York, and the absurdity of the characters distance it from reality further).

[42] "La Reine des Pommes" directly translates to "Queen of apples", and multiple covers for the book depict apples, which again could indicate a connection between the *femme fatale* and the biblical Eve.

Mosley's African American Detective

Not Contemporary

Devil in a Blue Dress (1990) is the debut novel of Walter Mosley: its protagonist is Ezekiel Rawlins (Easy), an African American war veteran who has fallen on hard times after losing his job as a factory worker, forcing him to investigate the disappearance of Daphne Monet, a young White woman, for a shady character called DeWitt Albright. The narrative unfolds in typically hardboiled fashion, in a post-World War II and segregated Los Angeles. [43] Mosley uses the tropes of hardboiled detective fiction to explore race and the history of the African American experience. His writing is witty and fast-paced in the vein of Hammett, Chandler, and Himes, but unlike them, he does not write directly about a contemporary setting, thus giving him the benefit of historical hindsight.

Back to First-Person

Classical detective fiction has a major focus on a central mystery, and thus an appealing puzzle is often prioritized over exploring the individual characters. Most of these stories are written in the third or second person as a result of this prioritization. There is a practical reason for this, which is hiding the solution and providing the reader with opportunities to solve the mystery for her- or himself: he or she has the same information and facts as the investigator. One of the major changes that accompanied hardboiled detective fiction was making the investigator the narrator (Collins, 2004).[44] Himes, arguably the first major author of African American hardboiled detective fiction, reverted to third-person narration, using dialogue to communicate people's lives, rather than internal representation. When Mosley wrote *Devil in A Blue Dress,* he adopted the technique of Hammett and Chandler, with a first-person, reliable, narrator, giving us a sympathetic insight into the main character, and allowing access to his thoughts. This change back to first-person provides a more direct insight into Easy's insights and experiences, race relations in particular, and the life history of one individual African American.

Language

To work successfully across racial boundaries, Easy has to communicate in different ways, depending on where he finds himself. When he talks to White people, he uses grammatical,

[43] For a slightly fuller summary of *Devil in a Blue Dress* see Appendix 3.
[44] This change in narrative changes the dynamic of the detective story, by removing much of the competition that readers would have with classical detective fiction, by excluding the surprise deductions often found in classical detective stories featuring investigators.

"correct", English.[45] However, when he talks to members of the African American community, or when he wants to be recognized as "Black", he speaks with what might once have appeared to some people to have been slang, but which is today recognised as African American Vernacular English (AAVE).[46]

> "I always tried to speak proper English in my life, the kind of English they taught in school, but I found over the years that I could only truly express myself in the natural, 'uneducated' dialect of my upbringing." (Mosley, 1990, p.10)

Here Easy shows his awareness of living not only in several ethnic communities but in different kinds of language. Himes does this too: words such as hip, cool, dig, cat, and bad (appear in *Rage in Harlem*, 1957, p.62, p.77 & p.80).[47]

> "Let him go, Raymond," I said. "He done learned his lesson good enough. If you kill'im then he won't have got it." I was just talking.
> "He fool enough t'call me out an' he ain't even got no gun! I kill the motherfucker!"
> "Let him live, Ray, an' he be scared'a you whenever you walk in the room."
> "Motherfucker better be scared. I kill the motherfucker. I kill'im!" (Mosley, 1990, p.174)

Here we see how Easy's choice of language is determined by who he is talking to, and what he wants or needs from the listener. The excerpt is from a conversation between Mouse (Raymond), and Easy.[48] If he wants to be taken seriously by a rich White man, he uses his educated voice.[49] Among his friends, he reverts to the language he grew up in and feels most comfortable with. Slang is often a feature of hardboiled detective fiction:

> "She'd gotten a lump sum—two hundred thousand berries" (Hammett, 1934, p.183)

[45] I put the word correct in quotation marks because the idea of one, universally recognized and superior, form of English is now a matter of debate (Finegan, n.d.).
[46] For a definition and short rundown of AAVE see Appendix 1.
[47] The use of negatively charged words to mean something positive is a part of "a great tradition in slang of the bad equals good model. You hear it a lot now in many of the words teenagers use - for example, when 'bad' or 'wicked' means 'great', 'wonderful'. The nature of slang is that it is oppositional" (Green, 1998). Cool is "according to linguistic anthropologist Robert L. Moore, the most popular slang term of approval in English." (Skinner, 2014)
[48] The name is a possible nod to Raymond Chandler.
[49] This is evident in Easy's first meeting with Albright which is completely without slang or AAVE grammar.

> You just slept the big sleep, not caring about the nastiness of how you died or where you fell. (Chandler, 1939, p.250)

Here we see examples from two giants of hardboiled detective fiction, with the word "berries", meaning money, and "the big sleep", from the titular novel, meaning death. But slang is part of the genre's apparatus of realism – the detective seems more authentic because his language is contemporary and shows familiarity with terms used by those on the streets.

To some extent, Mosley's usage of English varieties is typical of the genre in the sense that it is realistic: Easy, like most detectives, is both a man of the (under)world, and someone with an education, and therefore a degree of status. But with Easy, the worlds he has to straddle are not just defined by class or legality, but by ethnicity: he is a Black man in a predominantly White society, as Mosley himself is a Black writer in a predominantly White genre. Easy's solution, to move between languages, is also Mosley's solution – because he too is trying to find a literary language that is fluid or hybrid, that recognises both sides of his culture.[50]

Another trait which Mosley shares with hardboiled detective fiction is the use of quick-witted dialogue, and descriptions, that are such a staple of the genre.

> Her face lacked color and didn't look too healthy.
> "Tall, aren't you?" she said.
> "I didn't mean to be." (Chandler, 1939, p.3)
>
> [He] looked about as inconspicuous as a tarantula on a slice of angel food. (Chandler, 1940, p.2)
>
> "It was a blonde. A blonde to make a bishop kick a hole in a stained-glass window." (Chandler, 1940, p.97)

Though these descriptions are striking and memorable, they are not really accurate. Instead, they satisfy the expectation of entertaining and colourful dialogue.

[50] Mosley graduated from high school in the 1970s when lots of African Americans were politicised by the Civil Rights movements and the rise of political civil rights groups such as the Black Panthers. After a "hippie" period where he travelled to Europe, he would attend two colleges in Vermont, and he would graduate from Goddard College in Plainfield, with a Political Science degree in 1979. Despite entering a doctoral program, he would instead turn to computer programming (Kagawa, 2011).

In that follows, Mosley does something similar: the first description is of Dupree by Coretta, after Dupree passed out and before she and Easy have sex, and the second description is of Zeppo (a drunk with some form of palsy).

> "He use' to play till the cock crowed, but that ole cock don't crow nearly so much no mo'." (Mosley, 1990, p.41)
>
> Zeppo craned his head back further than I thought was possible, then he brought his wrists to his shoulder. He looked like a bird in agony. His smile was like death itself. (Mosley, 1990, p.137)

However, while Marlowe resorts to witticism to try to disarm dangerous situations, and to show that he is not easily scared, but at the same time not a threat, Easy has a lot more at stake, which makes the quick-wittedness add to the tension of certain scenes. Easy is also a lot more cautious with his language than Nick Charles or Phillip Marlowe because he is constantly aware of becoming the target of random racist violence. What we see from the above, however, is that Mosley is still like Chandler and Hammett in the sense that his dialogue is snappy or memorable, and his descriptions – (and) not just of people - draw attention to themselves. The protagonist is verbally clever, and this makes him entertaining, interesting, and trustworthy – one always has the sense that he is capable of talking himself out of most (but not all) situations. The cleverness is also a way of showing intelligence, and an eye for small details, a coolness or detachment, all of which are valuable in an investigator. In short, Easy is like his predecessors, his literary ancestors, but being Black means that he is also more vulnerable than them because of structural racism in American society.

Being a Visible Minority

Racial fault lines, some of them geographic, others personal, are a recurring point of tension in *Devil in a Blue Dress*. Mosley writes very directly about segregation, but from the point of view of the African American, which makes him new: Himes wrote about segregation, but never as directly as Mosley.

> I [Easy] WAS SURPRISED TO SEE A WHITE MAN walk into Joppy's bar. It's not just that he was white but he wore an off-white linen suit and shirt with a Panama straw hat and bone shoes over flashing white silk socks. His skin was smooth and pale with just a few freckles.

> One lick of strawberry-blond hair escaped the band of his hat. He stopped in the doorway, filling it with his large frame, and surveyed the room with pale eyes; not a color I'd ever seen in a man's eyes. When he looked at me I felt a thrill of fear, but that went away quickly because I was used to white people by 1948. (Mosley, 1990, p.1)

The ethnic identity of the character being described, and the sense of danger from the mere fact of him being White, is a strong feature of this opening passage: the word "white" appears five times, as well as the related words "pale" (twice) and "strawberry blond" (once): Panama hats are also invariably cream or white. But, the attention to sartorial detail is very typical of classic hardboiled tradition: linen, silk, suit, shirt, socks and shoes – these are all a feature of the genre, but also contribute to our sense that the narrator is observant, thorough, knowledgeable, and therefore reliable and even truthful.

Furthermore, this sequence alludes to the opening of *Farewell My Lovely*[51], where Moose Molly and Marlowe go into a "dine and dice joint" (against the latter's will) where the clientele is exclusively African American:

> In the corner a group of Negroes chanted and chattered in the cone of light over a crap table. […] There were a few customers, men and women, all Negroes.
>
> The chanting at the crap table stopped dead and the light over it jerked out. There was a sudden silence as heavy as a water-logged boat. Eyes looked at us, chestnut coloured eyes, set in faces that ranged from grey to deep black. Heads turned slowly and the eyes in them glistened and stared in the dead alien silence of another race. (Chandler, 1940, p.5)

This makes for uncomfortable reading: the people in the bar are generalised ("all Negroes") and distanced ("alien…race"). Furthermore, *Farewell My Lovely* opens with "It was one of the mixed blocks over on Central Avenue, the blocks that are not yet all Negro": in what follows, people of colour are referred to as either Black, coloured, or Negro (the latter word used 19 times in the text). Today the latter two terms are considered offensive, and in Chandler's description there is an extreme awareness of racial difference: the narrator's description of an area "not yet all Negro" suggests an anxiety about Black people taking over traditionally White neighbourhoods. So, the protagonist here is emphatically White.

[51] One of the few examples of writing about African American culture in any classical hardboiled detective fiction.

The opening of Mosley's story wrestles the perspective away from the White characters to the individuals in the bar; they are no longer objects being looked at, but subjects who look; no longer written about, but observing, describing, thinking. Right away, then, Mosley signals his debt to the detective tradition, but also his difference.

Whereas Marlowe's description unquestionably accepts the *de facto* segregation of ethnic groups, the author in no way seeks to distance himself or his protagonist from the violence that ensues when Malloy (who uses the racist "nigger" epithet) enters an establishment that is reserved for people of colour; Malloy throws one man who is consistently referred to as "it", through the window, injuring him severely, dehumanising him; another is knocked unconscious, and a third has his neck broken.

This makes it look as if Malloy is powerful and superior, physically, in the same way that Marlowe is superior, intellectually to the people in the bar. But it is important to remember that the people in the bar would be reluctant, at the time of the novel's setting, to get involved verbally or physically with the White intruders: they are the ones who would be arrested and made to face charges, because of a racist system of justice. Marlowe makes a comment that resembles Huck Finn's response to being asked if there were any fatalities after an accident ("Good gracious! Anybody hurt?" "No'm. Killed a nigger." "Well, it's lucky; because sometimes people do get hurt." (Twain, 1885, p.227)): "Well, all he did was kill a negro […] I guess that's only a misdemeanour." (Chandler, 1940, p.122)

It's not accidental, then, that *Devil in a Blue Dress* opens with a similar episode of racial transgression, but whereas it is easy for the White man, it is much more complicated and difficult for the African American in 1948, Easy. The breaking of such barriers is something which Easy must weigh carefully before attempting elsewhere in the rest of the novel.[52]

But Easy's ethnic identity is also an advantage, something positive. Easy uses the fact that he is an African American to find information that a White detective could not. He can blend in, and he understands the community. Furthermore, we learn that racial barriers make the different communities so tightknit that to be an outsider and get in is very difficult, especially because complexion is such a visible and obvious trait. But this obviousness also

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[52] The most notable example of this is when Easy goes to Santa Monica to meet Mr. Albright. "I was unhappy […] I wasn't used to going into white communities" (Mosley, 1990, p.53). However, there are other instances of lesser transgression, and an acknowledgement of Easy's thought process when in these scenarios. Easy never "loitered" outside of his neighbourhood away from his "own people" (Mosley, 1990, p.53), and he keeps away from the white people to the best of his ability while in a white neighbourhood because of possible "ugliness". (Mosley, 1990, p.54)

makes the barriers problematic when they relate to people whose ethnicity is not so easily identifiable.

Easy crosses racial barriers throughout *Devil in a Blue Dress* because that is where the clues lead him: he is searching for a White woman with connections to a wealthy White man. The scope of the setting is the entirety of Los Angeles, from the primarily African American areas, to the Caucasian-dominated Santa Monica (for a breakdown of notable places in LA, and areas where Easy crosses racial barriers, see Appendix 4). Just as Albright stands out when walking into Joppy's bar, Easy stands out when going into the White parts of town.

The racism in *Devil in a Blue Dress* is direct and specific for the most part, with police officers harassing Easy because he is an African American, and more generally, characters behaving differently depending on the racial identity of other characters they interact with. However, the most insidious of racist in *Devil in a Blue Dress* is Todd Carter, a very wealthy man, who Easy feels is not afraid of him in the same way that most "white people" are. Todd talks as if they were best friends, which aggravates Easy, because he is clearly not Todd's equal: "It was the worst kind of racism. The fact that he didn't even recognize our difference showed that he didn't care one damn about me." (Mosley, 1990, p.122).

It is not that Todd is patronising, condescending, or fake, but rather that he suspends the ethnic and class hierarchy between them because he can: Easy cannot, and he is very conscious of this.[53] Albright, on the other hand, does not need to consider the racial barriers in the same regard as Easy. Albright can transgress racial spaces without consequence.

By confiding in Easy, Todd makes him feel unimportant, like an animal incapable of understanding or betraying that trust: "I could have been a prized dog that he knelt to and hugged when he felt low." (Mosley, 1990, p.122). By contrast, Chandler's Marlowe belongs to a lower class than his clients, like Easy and Todd, but Marlowe's clients never think of him as something less than human because of his race.[54]

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[53] Examples of this can be seen in the scenes that I use later to write about Easy's relationship with the police. Todd is reminiscent of many rich characters in the hardboiled tradition, such as the General in *The Big Sleep*. However, where Marlowe would feel empathy for this old man, Easy does not: "I began to see him as some strange being. Like a baby who grows to man-size and terrorizes his poor parents with his strength and his stupidity." (Mosley, 1990, p.122) Easy has no qualms about taking advantage of this rich man: "There was no way out but to run, and I couldn't run, so I decided to milk all those white people for all the money they'd let go of. Money bought everything. Money paid the rent and fed the kitty. Money was why Coretta was dead and why DeWitt Albright was going to kill me." (Mosley, 1990, p.122)

[54] Hammett and Chandler rarely pay attention to race, despite writing about major cities in the U.S. Chandler's *The Big Sleep* does not mention African Americans at all in its depiction of Los Angeles, and Hammett's *The Thin Man* mentions an African American man once, as a criminal who shot a man named Barlow in a stick up (Hammett, 1934, p.223).

Easy cannot hide the fact that he is Black, but he can use the fact that the White characters in the novel fail to see his humanity, and thus do not consider him intelligent enough to outsmart the other characters. Easy can get information from both sides of society as he is both Easy and just another African American man. On one side, being an "invisible man" is great for Easy to be able to work cases that cross the racial barriers, but on the other side, he is in danger of being physically harmed by both communities.[55]

Stakes

The conflicts in most hardboiled detective stories often derive from the protagonist getting into situations where his ethics are tested. On a scene-to-scene basis, the smaller conflicts regularly involve someone with a gun. *Devil in a Blue Dress* adds a new form of conflict to the formula that is race-related fear. While Nick Charles and Philip Marlow rarely seem afraid, Easy often expresses anxiety related to potential problems that can arise in apparently normal situations.

This is further illustrated in how Easy is treated by the police. Being African American in 1948 made you a second-class citizen, and Easy is harassed by the police on multiple occasions: nor is he the only one to experience this.

> [A] patrol would arrest any sprinting Negro they encountered. (Mosley, 1990, p.78)
>
> I was worried because they didn't follow the routine. I had played the game of "cops and nigger" before […] they throw you into a holding tank with other "suspects". (Mosley, 1990, p.71)

The racism and hate in Mosley's Los Angeles are even more apparent when we consider Easy as a hardboiled detective. Marlowe and Nick do not have to worry about the police harassing them in any serious way. A traditional hardboiled detective can have a rivalry with the police, or they can be working for the police, but there is no power struggle such as the one Easy experiences. The police in Los Angeles do not see Easy as a detective, they see him first and foremost as an African American man.

Property, or home-ownership, having a safe and settled place to live, adds another dimension to Easy's ethnic identity. In fact, the problem which the novel begins with is that he struggles to pay his mortgage. Owning a house of his own empowers Easy and is just one

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[55] *Invisible Man* is the title of a 1952 novel by Ralph Ellison, the main premise of which was that the protagonist was seen and judged only by his colour.

of many things he does to overcome the effects of racial discrimination: "'[Easy] just got his high school papers from night school and he been threatenin' on some college'" (Mosley, 1990, p.4).

Home-ownership and employment (especially self-employment) were key aims of the civil rights era (Miller, 2008), but also key components of the American dream of the 20th century.[56] Easy is the embodiment of hard work, determination, and initiative, and owning his own home is crucial to his sense of self-worth: in a crucial passage we are told that it makes him feel "just as good as any white man." (Mosley, 1990, p.9). Were Easy to lose his house, he would not just lose his home, but his sense of self-worth, his dignity, and his self-respect.

If Charles and Marlowe were to die on duty, they would have died for their cause. Easy on the other hand, could be killed randomly by a police officer or someone else who has nothing to do with the case that he is on: the stakes are much higher for him. For Charles and Marlowe, too, it is their ethics or personal interest that are the motivating factors. But Easy is also blackmailed later in the story: he risks being framed for murders he did not commit. It is easier for the police to blame a random African American man than it is to solve the crime. At this point, Easy is deep into the investigation, and he needs to solve the mystery to stay out of prison, not only because of economic or individual reasons, but because of legal ones: he needs to solve the case to earn a living and to keep possession of his home.[57]

Easy's fear of being at the wrong place at the wrong time highlights the structural racism in *Devil in a Blue Dress,* and also what is at stake. This fear is something that is expressed also in *A Rage in Harlem.*

> Colored folks in Harlem didn't want to get caught by the police whether they had done anything or not. (Himes, 1957, p.109)
>
> "[The] police have white slavery on the brain when it comes to colored men and white women" (Mosley, 1990, p.93)
>
> "Are you arresting me?". "You'll see," Mason said again. He was pulling me toward the gate. "I've got the right to know why you're taking me." "You got the right to fall down and break your face, nigger. You got a right to die," (Mosley, 1990, p.70)

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[56] For a definition of the American dream see Appendix 1.

[57] The prevalence of imprisonment among African American men is a complex issue that is, and has, been a problem in America for a long time. Statistical evidence of discrimination can be found in various documents published by the U.S. Department of Justice. An example: *Prevalence of Imprisonment in the U.S. Population, 1974-2001,* special report by Thomas P. Bonczar (August 2003), and for a newer example you could consider the sentencing project report by Ashley Nellis, *The Color of Justice: Racial and Ethnic Disparity in State Prisons* (2021).

The South

The South is a prominent feature in both Mosley and Himes' detective novels. Historically, the South has been a place of divided loyalties for African Americans largely because of the legacy of slavery, Jim Crow laws, lynchings, segregation, and disenfranchising.[58]

Easy is from the South, and it is from there that Mouse comes to help Easy in the later parts of the novel. Albright is also introduced talking with a "light well-to-do Southern" drawl. The history of the South is such that its cuisine, language, names, and customs, are widespread in African American literature. In contrast, Philip Marlowe and Nick Charles are not explicitly defined by their ethnic heritage, but rather by their actions and their aesthetics.[59]

Aesthetics and Ethics

> I was wearing my powder-blue suit, with dark blue shirt, tie and display handkerchief, black brogues, black wool socks with dark blue clocks on them. I was neat, clean, shaved and sober, and I didn't care who knew it. I was everything the well-dressed private detective ought to be. (Chandler, 1939, p.1)

This is the opening of *The Big Sleep* and it is perhaps the prototypical depiction of a hardboiled detective. The gender and skin-colour are not mentioned, and while the use of a suit implies a male character of any race, it is also the case that being male, White, and heterosexual are the normative traits of a hardboiled detective, so describing those features directly or indirectly would be redundant.[60]

The suit becomes a sort of uniform for the hardboiled detective: being a "smooth and natty dresser" is part of the identity (Mosley, 1990, p.10). However, in Mosley's novel it is not Easy who is described this way, but rather Mouse and Albright. Easy does not wear the hardboiled detective uniform from the start, because he is not a detective when the story begins: he turns into one over the course of the novel. After several attempts at collecting

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[58] For definitions of Jim Crow laws, lynchings, and disenfranchising see Appendix 1.

[59] Examples of this exaggerated (even toxic) masculinity, apart from the suit, include drinking, fighting, and sexism.

[60] Homophobia in hardboiled fiction is rampant and problematic, and none of the authors that I look at in this thesis does anything to address this "The tense homophobia of Philip Marlowe and Dashiell Hammett's Sam Spade, their hysterical and often violent reactions to gay men is firmly echoed in Himes." (Abbott, 2002, pp.179-180)

information using a direct approach, he learns how to infiltrate and be more subtle to get the information he needs to find Frank.

> I wanted to find out the whereabouts of Frank Green but it had to come up in normal conversation. Most barbers know all the important information in the community. That's why I was getting my hair cut. (Mosley, 1990, p.134)

This comes after he puts on the suit for the first time, and in doing so adopts the identity of a true detective.

> I was dressed in my best suit and ready to ride by 10 a.m. I thought that it was time to gather my own information. (Mosley, 1990, p.111)

However, gathering information and wearing a suit are not the only things that a classical hardboiled detective consists of.

> I was neat, clean, shaved and sober, and I didn't care who knew it. I was everything the well-dressed private detective ought to be. (Chandler, 1939, p.1)

This describes the idealised version of the detective, while also suggesting that he is not *always* neat, clean, shaved and sober. The consumption of alcohol is a motif in hardboiled fiction, which also relates to the detective's status on the margins of the law, as the figure first emerged during the era of Prohibition in the United States (1920-1933). While not a major factor in a novel set in 1948, it still provides an important historic and literary background, for one of the most significant locations in *Devil in a Blue Dress* is the speakeasy.

> John's place was a speakeasy before they repealed Prohibition. But by 1948 we had legitimate bars all over L.A. John liked the speakeasy business though, and he had been in so much trouble with the law that City Hall wouldn't have given him a license to drive, much less to

> sell liquor. So John kept paying off the police and running an illegal nightclub through the back door of a little market. (Mosley, 1990, p.25)

The speakeasy harks back to the classical hardboiled tradition, but it also has a narrative function, establishing Easy as a character on the margins of the law, while also depicting a man with ties to his community, who supports that community even if that means doing something illegal. Furthermore, Easy displays some of the same characteristics of previous hardboiled detectives, where alcohol is consumed frequently, and the spirit of choice, in the vein of Marlowe and Nick, is bourbon or scotch.[61] Although Easy is not averse to having a drink, he never comes close to the latent alcoholism of Marlowe or Nick.[62] Easy often finds himself observing people who habitually drink too much or are in the process doing so on a particular occasion. He does not seem to disdain heavy drinkers, but they are pointed out in the novel, and often do things while drunk that make life more difficult for people around them. In short, Easy is not a heavy drinker, unlike previous hardboiled detectives, but he moves in similar environments and favours the same kinds of hard alcohol.[63]

The cowboy and the knight

It has been argued that one of the literary ancestors of the hardboiled detective emerges in part from another kind of American sub-cultural hero, the hard-drinking cowboy: it is the "cowboy adapted to life on the city streets." (Thompson, 2006, p.28).[64]

Another source is the knight. The connection is the moral code and the outsider mentality. However, Mosley's hardboiled detective does not exhibit these kinds of characteristics. Easy differentiates himself from his predecessors by having a desire for family, friends, property, and work. The lonely outsider who operates in some sense outside society could not be farther from Easy, who wants to be a *part* of society, a contributing member of his community. The sense of community and belonging are two of the major themes in *Devil in a Blue Dress.* Segregation is also another aspect that makes the

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[61] When Easy orders the usual at Joppy's bar he is given a bourbon on ice (Mosley, 1990, p.4).

[62] The exception to this is when Easy uses alcohol to self-medicate. "I put away a pint and a half of bourbon before I could get to sleep" (Mosley, 1990, p.85). This is minuscule compared to the abundance of alcohol consumed by classical Hardboiled detectives.

[63] Examples of Easy's interactions with heavy drinking characters; Joppy and Easy at Ricardo's, where "It was a serious kind of place peopled with jaundice-eyed bad men who smoked and drank heavily"; speaking to the "drunk" in front of John's; Easy observing Mouse and Dupree drinking till they fell asleep; his description of Zeppo and his father.

[64] In Western films, the saloon is very much the antecedent of the speakeasy, a place of lawlessness, physical brutality, and sexual promiscuity (Carson, 1963). And the cowboy is very often an isolated moral figure who does the right thing even at great personal cost.

comparison between hardboiled detectives and the Western heroes less valid in Easy's case. Segregation, by definition, means that Easy has a place where he "belongs" which in itself is anti-Western.

The second part of the comparison has to do with the ethical code that most hardboiled detectives live by. The use of violence in both Westerns and Arthurian legends are often major parts of the plot, where violence is used to seek justice. Easy's aversion to violence is something that further differentiates him from the more classical hardboiled protagonist and his origins: it is another distinctive part of his moral code, as we see here:

> I could have broken his neck. I could have put out his eyes or broken all of his fingers. But instead I held my breath. […] I could have killed all of them too. What did they know about violence? I could have crushed their windpipes one by one and they couldn't have done a thing to stop me. They couldn't even run fast enough to escape me. I was still a killing machine. (Mosley, 1990, p.55)

Easy killed people in the war, and he grew up around violence, but when we meet him in *Devil in a Blue Dress,* he wants to put his "wild days" behind him, as he sees himself as a better man now. Again, this is linked to his status as a homeowner (Mosley, 1990, p.50).

The casual use of violence that is so often displayed by hardboiled detectives is absent in Easy.[65] However, the need for physical force to gather information or for the purpose of defence, is something that is a staple of hardboiled detective fiction, and this is a need fulfilled here by the use of a companion.

The companion in detective fiction often fulfils a specific role in the narrative, such as Watson to Sherlock Holmes. Watson is the narrator, the witness as it were, but he is also practical – both a doctor, and a former army man who can use a gun: he is pragmatic and sensible, and useful in many ways. In the American tradition, the protagonist is both narrator and investigator, brains and brawn. For Nick, the use of violence is pragmatic (though it is sometimes out of proportions), and for Marlowe, it is most often about getting information: despite his allusion to the noble knight, he will slap anyone, even women, to get that information. But Robert B. Parker, who wrote a doctorate on Chandler, mixed this up a little in his series of books on Spenser, the private eye. Spenser is still narrator and investigator,

[65] Hammett's Nick even knocks his wife, Nora, unconscious just to calm her down: "it took us five minutes to bring Nora to" (Hammett, 1934, p.30)

but when he needs help, he calls on an African American character called Hawk.[66] Mosley does something similar: Easy has a back-up called Mouse. Mouse is the surrogate for the ruthless hardboiled detective: he does not shy away from violence, he indulges in it: "He could put a knife in a man's stomach and ten minutes later sit down to a plate of spaghetti." (Mosley, 1990, p.50)

Companions

Detectives in fiction have been known to get help from criminals. Sherlock Holmes uses the "Street Arabs" (Doyle, 2013, p.83), a league of homeless children led by a kid named Wiggins, to collect data. But Holmes, Poirot, and Marple are given access in many ways to a higher class than Easy, so, the characters that they usually get help from are from those classes or from the police. Even Marlowe and Nick have a close, though sometimes rivalrous, relationship with the police, and this makes it easier for them to get access to the crime scene in many cases, and sometimes to gain information that the police already possess.[67] Easy on the other hand cannot have such familiarity because of structural racism: he is always a suspect, not an informal assistant in the investigation of the crime.

Something that further differentiates Easy from the more traditional hardboiled detectives of Chandler and Hammett, is the notion that Easy must consider where his loyalty lies, as it relates to community. Marlowe may consider his loyalty to his employer, but communal loyalty is something that is arguably more integral to lower-class America than middle-class America.

> [Mouse:] "Nigger cain't pull his way out of the swamp wit' out no help […] you gotta have somebody at yo' back, man. That's just a lie them white men give 'bout makin' it on they own. They always got they backs covered." (Mosley, 1990, pp.155-56)

The pull between loyalty to the community and Easy's code of honour comes to a head in the final confrontation of *Devil in a Blue Dress*. Both Easy and the reader learn that Joppy killed Corretta, and in classical detective fiction this would normally lead to an arrest and

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[66] We first meet Hawk in the fourth novel about Spenser (*Promised Land* (1976)) and he is a prevalent companion throughout the series. He is first described as such: "a tall black man with a bald head and high cheekbones. [The] waist and the chest and stomach that showed were as hard and unadorned as ebony." (Parker, 1976, p.12)

[67] Detectives like Sherlock Holmes, Hercule Poirot, and Ms. Marple may solve the case, but it is the police who take the culprit away for judicial punishment. Holmes and Poirot are even at times employed by the police. Nick in *The Thin Man* is no different.

punishment, however, Easy would have to betray his community to do so, because the murderer is an African American. Mouse's answer to this problem is to serve justice himself. The point is not whether this is right or wrong, better or worse – it is that Easy's strong sense of belonging and fellowship ensures that they find solutions together as a community. Easy's need for community is one of the main aspects of his character that differentiates him from previous hardboiled detectives, while also following in the footsteps of Himes.

Woman

Coretta is a victim in the hardboiled tradition in the sense that she is someone the detective knows from before the story starts. Hardboiled detective fiction often has multiple murder victims, and *Devil in a Blue Dress* is no exception, but Coretta is arguably the most important victim because of how her death relates to community and the final confrontation. Coretta is not the *femme fatale* of the novel, but she does seduce Easy, and in the tradition of hardboiled detective fiction, she is someone to be desired and thus a potential obstacle in the quest to solve the crime: "She was a vain man's dream." (Mosley, 1990, p.40) The sexualisation of women and subsequent lack of character development is an aspect of hardboiled detective fiction that Mosley does not amend or improve in any substantial way.

However, the *femme fatale* of *Devil in a Blue Dress* is interesting not only because she is one of the biggest mysteries of the story, but also because the revelation about her identity ties into the major theme in the novel about racial identity. Daphne Monet is beautiful, sexual, and someone who uses her sexuality to seduce the hardboiled detective. She also appears to be White.

> It was a picture of the head and shoulders of a pretty young white woman. The picture had been black and white originally but it was touched up for color like the photos of jazz singers that they put out in front of nightclubs. She had light hair coming down over her bare shoulders and high cheekbones and eyes that might have been blue if the artist got it right. (Mosley, 1990, p.19)

You could argue that the mention of jazz is an allusion to the truth about Daphne's background since many early performers of Jazz were African American, and the word itself is thought to have African origins (Porter, 2018). The ability to be perceived as White is something that Daphne has tried to use to achieve upwards socioeconomic mobility: "Daphne was like the chameleon lizard." (Mosley, 1990, p.186). However, she can never be considered fully "white" because of her African American heritage, and at the same time she

can never truly be considered fully part of the African American community, because she appears to be White. Samuel Coale argues that identity in hardboiled detective fiction is usually “provisional and arbitrary”, and that the exception to this rule can be found in how skin colour defines identity in Mosley’s version of America (Coale, 2000, p.174). What is interesting about Daphne is that: despite being sexualised and a fairly flat character, she mirrors Easy, structurally within the narrative as someone who crosses racial boundaries, and geographies, but at a cost. As the city and the world that Mosley creates is defines and segregates people based on their appearance, it is compelling that Mosley can convey so many aspects of the story (race, identity, and belonging) with a classical hardboiled *femme fatale*.

Conclusion and Concluding Remarks

The hardboiled detective fiction genre is both popular and accessible. Despite its wide readership, it took considerable time before it included Black voices and perspectives. In this thesis, I have outlined the origins and characteristics of the anglophone branch, of the genre, from Britain to America, before settling on (some of) the major African American contributors in the modern era. There are two objectives here: to show in what ways these contributors align themselves with inherited and recognisable genre features (in terms of the protagonist, narrative technique, setting, style and themes, as outlined in *The Thin Man* and *The Big Sleep* as Defined by Cawelti section); to tease out the ways in which they make an original contribution to the genre.

The African American authors that I have considered in this thesis have added their own voices and experiences to a typically White genre. But, their contribution is not only about being Black, they have also added their own, individual, elements, such as Easy's concern with earning a living, having a home, enjoying the rights afforded to an American citizen – very ordinary, modest, ambitions which he struggles to maintain because he is a victim of (subtle and non-subtle) discrimination.

Just like Hammett and Chandler, Himes and Mosley engage in heightened realistic settings that are filled with corruption and greed. However, both Himes and Mosley are less cynical in their conclusions that does not end in cynical contemplation: *Devil in a Blue Dress* ends with laughter, and a positive reflection of the importance of community - "All you got is your friends" (Mosley, 1990, p.219) – while Easy gains economical independence and even (later, in *A Red Death,* 1991) becomes a landlord. *A Rage in Harlem* concludes with Imabelle and Jackson getting together – providing the classic happy ending of a historical comedy.

Mosley uses the hardboiled tradition to write a novel that engages with race, community, and belonging to a much greater extent than his predecessors. However, he also falls into many of the same pitfalls that previous hardboiled authors have been criticized for, such as underdeveloped and over-sexualized female characters. Despite Mosley in many ways following in the footsteps of Himes (with respect to setting and language) he reverts to the classic narrative technique of first-person. Mosley retains the engagement that Himes' Harlem cycle had with African American culture (especially its connections to the South) but the progression of *Devil in a Blue Dress* and its tone are closer to Hammett and Chandler. His ultimate achievement is using a popular cultural genre to explore African American urban lives and history: the danger of moving outside "Black" areas; police harassment and judicial

discrimination, but also positive things such as community, language, and culture. Whereas Himes looked at the negative impact of African American slavery, with poor living conditions, urban and economic segregation, and a climate of distrust, Mosley looks more at the individual legacy of slavery, giving insights into the thoughts of one African American's experience, as he transgresses racial barriers, and interacts with a world that often sees him as lesser, and other. This is perhaps more forceful – because we get to see and feel that experience.

Loyalty to the community is a shared motif in Himes and Mosley: "It was the code of Harlem for one brother to help another lie to white cops." (Himes, 1957, p.107). But despite both authors engage with race in some manner, Mosley differs from Himes: Gravedigger Jones and Coffin Ed operate primarily in Harlem. The only two times that segregation and racial tensions are the direct focus in *A Rage in Harlem* are when Jackson tries to run from the cops and goes into the nice part of town, and when he gets help to hide from the cops.

> Colored folks didn't respect colored cops. But they respected big shiny pistols of sudden death. (Himes, 1957, p.62)
>
> They were going fast up the wet black pavement of St Nicholas Avenue. On the east side of the street were rows of apartment buildings, becoming larger, more spacious, better kept, facing the street cliff of the rocky park across the street. Above was the university plateau, overlooking the Hudson River. (Himes, 1957, p.173)

Both Coffin Ed and Gravedigger Jones are African Americans working predominately in an African American community, while Easy is an African American who works across racial barriers. This difference gives Mosley the opportunity to engage more widely with racial tensions and segregation: with Himes, it is an assumption.

My point, then, is that although Mosley and Himes are both Black, they do not engage with the genre in the exact same manner: they are just as different in style and in what they add to the genre, as other authors of hardboiled fiction. The point of this thesis, in short, was to show in what ways they can be categorized as traditional practitioners of American crime fiction, and in what ways they use certain aspects of hardboiled form – the struggle to assert a masculine individual, the double status of being outside the institutions of the law and order while seeking dignity and justice – while creating unique characters and recognisable worlds.

I hope that I have shown that Himes and Mosley share an ethnic identity, but speak in their own voices – and that in the hardboiled tradition, there can never be enough voices.

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Appendix 1: Definitions

BROADSIDE & PENNY DREADFUL	Britannica defines a broadside as "a descriptive or narrative verse or song, commonly in a simple ballad form, on a popular theme, and sung or recited in public places or printed on broadsides for sale in the streets.", while a penny dreadful was a "cheap book or magazine containing stories of crime, terror, etc." (Britannica, 2016; Neufeldt, 1996).
POLICE PROCEDURAL	The *Cambridge Dictionary* defines the police procedural as "a type of novel or drama about how the police investigate and solve a crime, or a novel, film, or television programme of this type." (Cambridge University Press, n.d.).
PRACTICAL, OR APPLIED, CRITICISM & NEW CRITICISM	Practical, or applied criticism is an analytic approach where a text is studied in and for itself, without recourse to historical or biographical context (Abrams, 1999, p.50). New Criticism is derived from, among other things, Practical Criticism and stresses the importance of analysing literature based on the texts themselves (Abrams, 1999, p.180).
PROHIBITION	Prohibition is defined in Collins COBUILD as "the law that prevented the manufacture, sale, and transporting of alcoholic drinks between 1919 and 1933. Prohibition also refers to the period when this law existed." (Sinclair, 2018).
SEGREGATION	Segregation: "means to keep [two groups] physically apart", also referring to the practice of separating African Americans and Caucasians because of the belief that these groups could not live in harmony (Sinclair, 2018).
EMANCIPATION	Emancipation is: "if people are emancipated, they are freed from unpleasant or unfair social, political, or legal restrictions" (Sinclair, 2018), and when we consider the

	emancipation of slaves, we are talking about *The Emancipation Proclamation* (1863) which is the law issued by Abraham Lincoln to free all slaves: "all persons held as slaves [within the rebellious states] are, and henceforward shall be free." (National Archives, 2022).
AAVE	AAVE is characterised in short by the use of vocabulary consisting of words with West African meaning with either West African form, or English form or loan translations, grammar where they drop the standard English conjugated be verb, and double negatives not being positive. Examples of this include: "to be a cool cat" meaning being a calm friend or person. The words cat and cool are derived from West African languages and translated into English directly (Sidnell, n.d.). The origin of AAVE is a point of contention among linguists that are quite divided, but in this thesis, I have chosen to emphasize the similarities between AAVE and West African languages (Rickford, n.d.). A notable characteristic of AAVE is the use of the verb "be", as for instance, in "He be all right" which would appear to be grammatically incorrect, according to the verb agreement rule in standard English: tense is another feature. Many AAVE words and phrases can be mistakenly identified as slang, but AAVE is not informal and has its own grammatical rules, based on the pidgin language that African slaves made up when learning English during the slave days in America (Rickford, n.d.).
THE AMERICAN DREAM	The American dream of the 20th century is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as "the ideal that every citizen of the United States should have an equal opportunity to achieve success and prosperity through hard work, determination, and initiative." (Churchwell, 2021).

JIM CROW LAWS, LYNCHINGS, & DISENFRANCHISING	Jim Crow laws: referring here to segregation. Lynchings: "if a group of people lynch someone, they kill that person without a trial". Disenfranchising: "take away their right to vote, or their right to vote for what they really want." (Sinclair, 2018).

Appendix 2: Hammett & Chandler - Biography and Relevance

Samuel Dashiell Hammett (born 27. May 1894 in Maryland, USA, died in New York 10. January 1961) is considered by many to be the father of hardboiled detective fiction, and both many of the tropes he pioneered, and his way of writing are still considered hallmarks of the genre.[68] Hammett worked as a private detective for the famous Pinkerton detective service, which gives a certain validity to his fiction. His later work consisted largely of screenwriting (Øverland, 2020). He wanted his genre of choice to be taken seriously, writing in 1928 that:

> I am one of the few [. . .] people moderately literate who take the detective story seriously […] Some day somebody's going to make "literature" of it. (Thompson, 2006, p.31)

Hammett wanted to create fictional worlds with immediacy and authenticity. He did this by knowing his worlds existentially. Hammett's style can seem minimalistic. The lack of descriptions and fast pace and sometimes abrupt switch from one scene to the next, means that his stories sometimes have a dreamlike, associative, quality. This style is one of the reasons he is compared to Hemingway. Hammett is known for having a spare, hard, and realistic prose style which critics have admired. Even his contemporary Raymond Chandler praised Hammett for his writing, stating:

> He was spare, frugal, hardboiled, but he did over and over again what only the best writers can ever do at all. He wrote scenes that seemed never to have been written before. (Thompson, 2006, p.32)

Anthony Boucher (mystery author, critic) claimed that Hammett had moved beyond classic detective fiction, making him critical to the American detective fiction tradition (Thompson, 2006, p32), and the celebrated Ross Macdonald stated that "Hammett was the first American writer to use the detective story for the purposes of a major novelist, to present a vision, blazing if disenchanted, of our lives." (Thompson, 2006, p.178).

Raymond Thornton Chandler (1888-1959) is most famous for his hardboiled novels set in California where we follow private detective Philip Marlowe as he navigates his way

[68] He is most famous for his five novels *Red Harvest* (1929), *The Dain Curse* (1929), *The Maltese Falcon* (1930), *The Glass Key* (1931), and *The Thin Man* (1935). All these novels have had multiple movie adaptations, except for *Red Harvest* (However, *Red Harvest* has influenced multiple movies, and has arguably been adapted in *Roadhouse Nights* (1930), *Yojimbo* (1961), and *Last Man Standing* (1996)).

through the gloomy underworld of Los Angeles. *The Big Sleep* is the first hardboiled detective novel in this series and arguably his most celebrated novel. However, as someone who followed in the footsteps of Hammett, he also faces similar criticism, including accusations of corrupting and/or shallow material (McCann, 2000, p.148).[69] However, Chandler is often considered by many to be the best hardboiled detective fiction writer, and with his vivid descriptions and witty dialogue, he is arguably the genre's most recognizable (and often replicated) voice. He placed a lot of importance on individual scenes, and when asked about what makes a good hardboiled detective plot answered that "a good plot was one which made good scenes. The ideal mystery was one you would read if the end was missing." (Thompson, 2006, p.193).[70]

[69] Unlike Hammett, Chandler did not have a background in detective work. He worked as a petroleum company executive in California from 1919 and started writing during the depression of the 1930s after losing his job (Chicago Public Library, 2008).

[70] This could be because of his screenwriter background (which Hammett had as well), or just because of the limitations of writing effectively for a magazine. (Chicago Public Library, 2008) His writing style is a lot more descriptive than Hammett's, which makes his novels less plot-driven, but not to such an extent that they become uneventful.

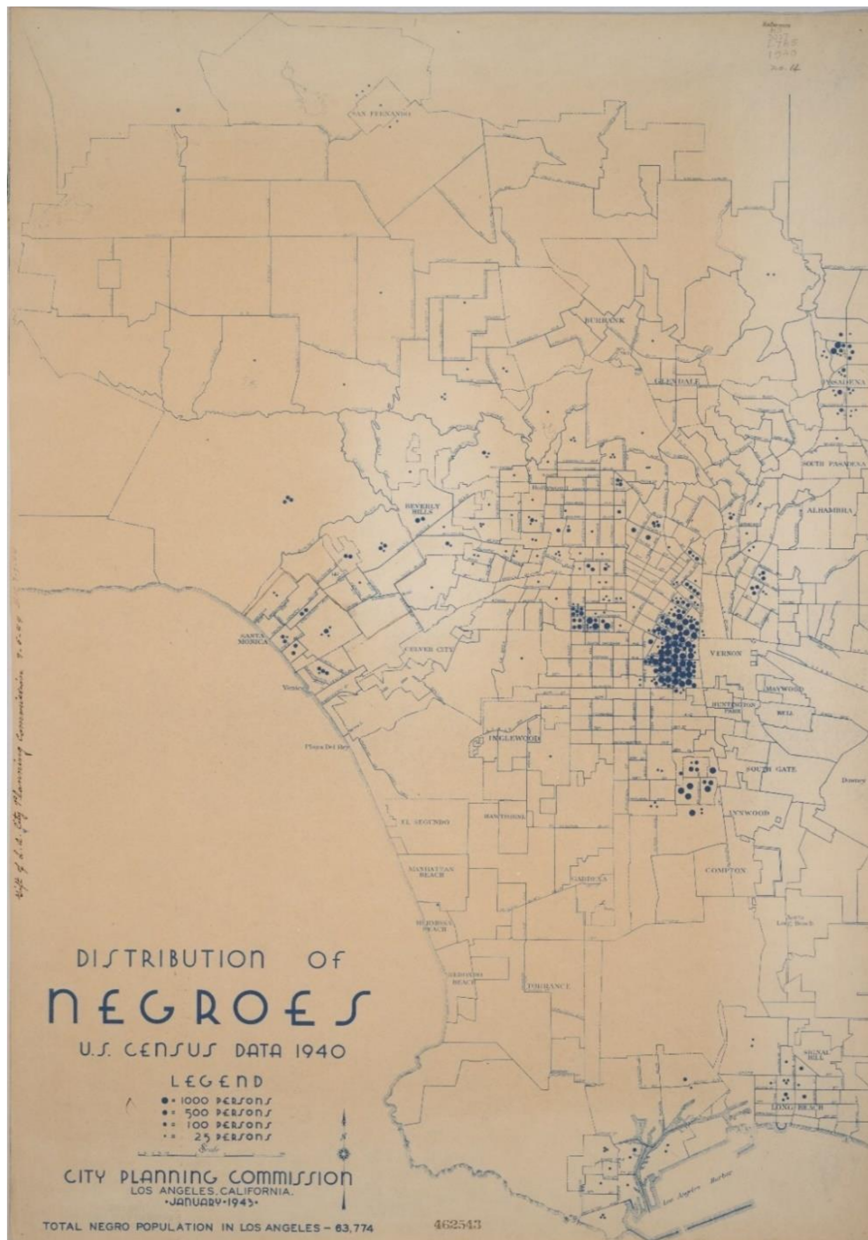
Appendix 3: Summary of *Devil in a Blue Dress*

The year is 1948 in Los Angeles, and Ezekiel “Easy” Rawlins has lost his job and is not able to pay his mortgage. While sitting in Joppy’s bar he is approached by Dewitt Albright (who is hired by a man called Todd Carter) who wants Easy’s help to find Daphne Monet, a white woman rumoured to frequent a mostly African American dive bar. After taking the job he goes to the bar where he meets Coretta and Dupree, friends of Easy from his life back in Houston. Coretta knows Daphne but gives Easy the wrong address of where Daphne is staying. After drinking at the bar, Easy helps Coretta carry Dupree to their home, where Easy ends up having sex with Coretta while Dupree is in another room. Easy is arrested shortly after this as a suspect in the murder of Coretta, which Easy is told about while interrogated by the police. After being released, Easy keeps investigating Daphne’s disappearance. Then after further investigation Easy finds Daphne (and the body of Daphne’s friend, Richard). He has by this point found out that Albright knows that Daphne has stolen a large sum of money from a rich businessman called Todd Carter, and Albright wants to keep the money. Easy is trying to protect Daphne by this point, but Albright manages to kidnap Daphne. Easy gets help from a friend from Houston, Mouse, who is a violent criminal with some domestic problems back in Houston. They track down Albright and rescue Daphne. Joppy (the bar owner from the start of the novel) is with Albright at the time, and we find out that he murdered Coretta. Then we find out that Daphne really is a light-skinned African American woman called Ruby, and that she is the sister of a local gangster. Mouse kills Joppy. Then Mouse, Ruby, and Easy split the stolen money, and Easy promises to fix the situation with the police. Mouse, Ruby, and Easy then go their separate ways. Easy blackmails Carter to get help with the police, and then he takes up detective work full time.

Appendix 4: An Illustrated Look at the Geographic Racial Fault Lines That Easy Crossed in *Devil in a Blue Dress*

The three first maps below show distribution of African Americans in LA. Two of them with racial dot maps, and the third with a redlined neighbourhood map, which was used for segregation. The fourth map is a map of Easy's movement in LA in *Devil in a Blue Dress.*

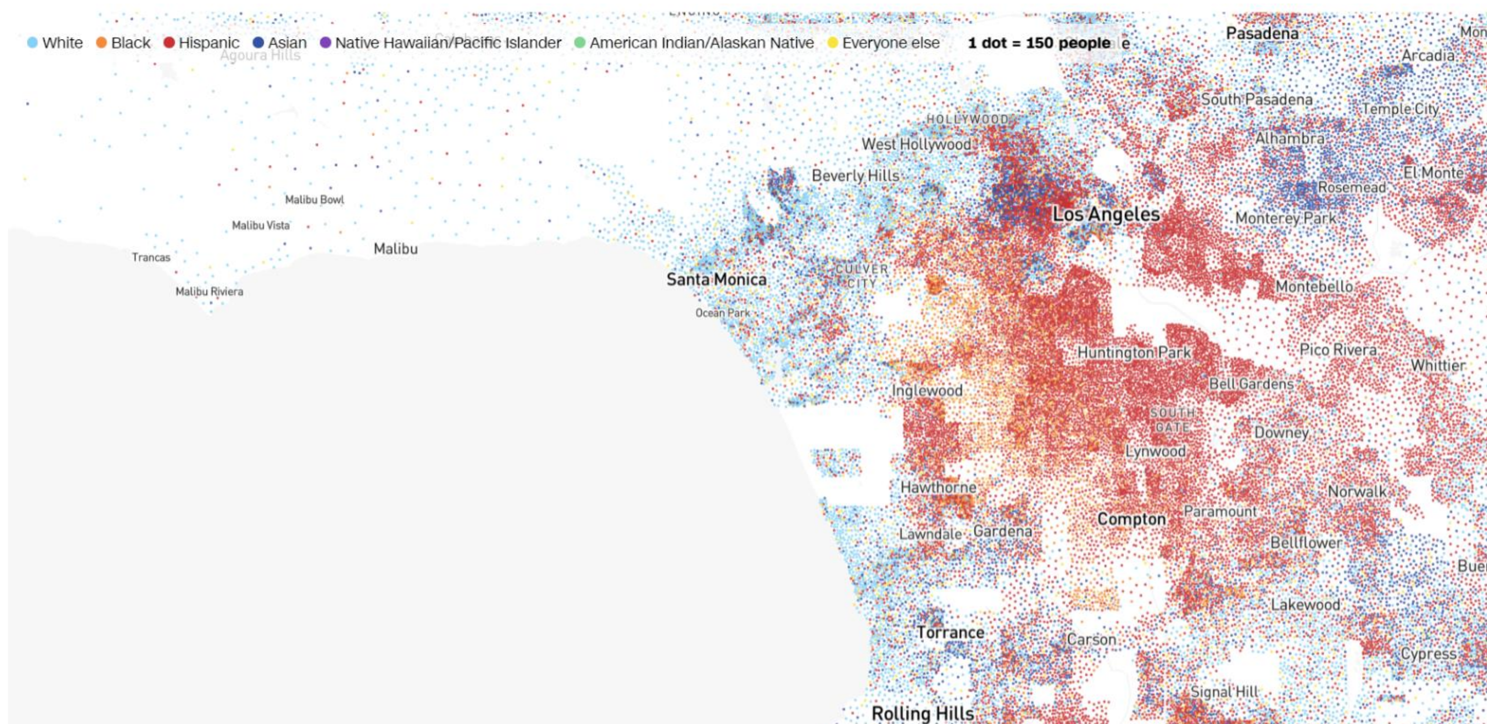
Map of distribution of African American population, 1943



Source: https://digital.library.ucla.edu/catalog/ark:/21198/zz001d363g

This map shows that the African American population is densest in the areas by Hunting Park, which is consistent with the redlined map, and the descriptions of L.A. in *Devil in a Blue Dress.*

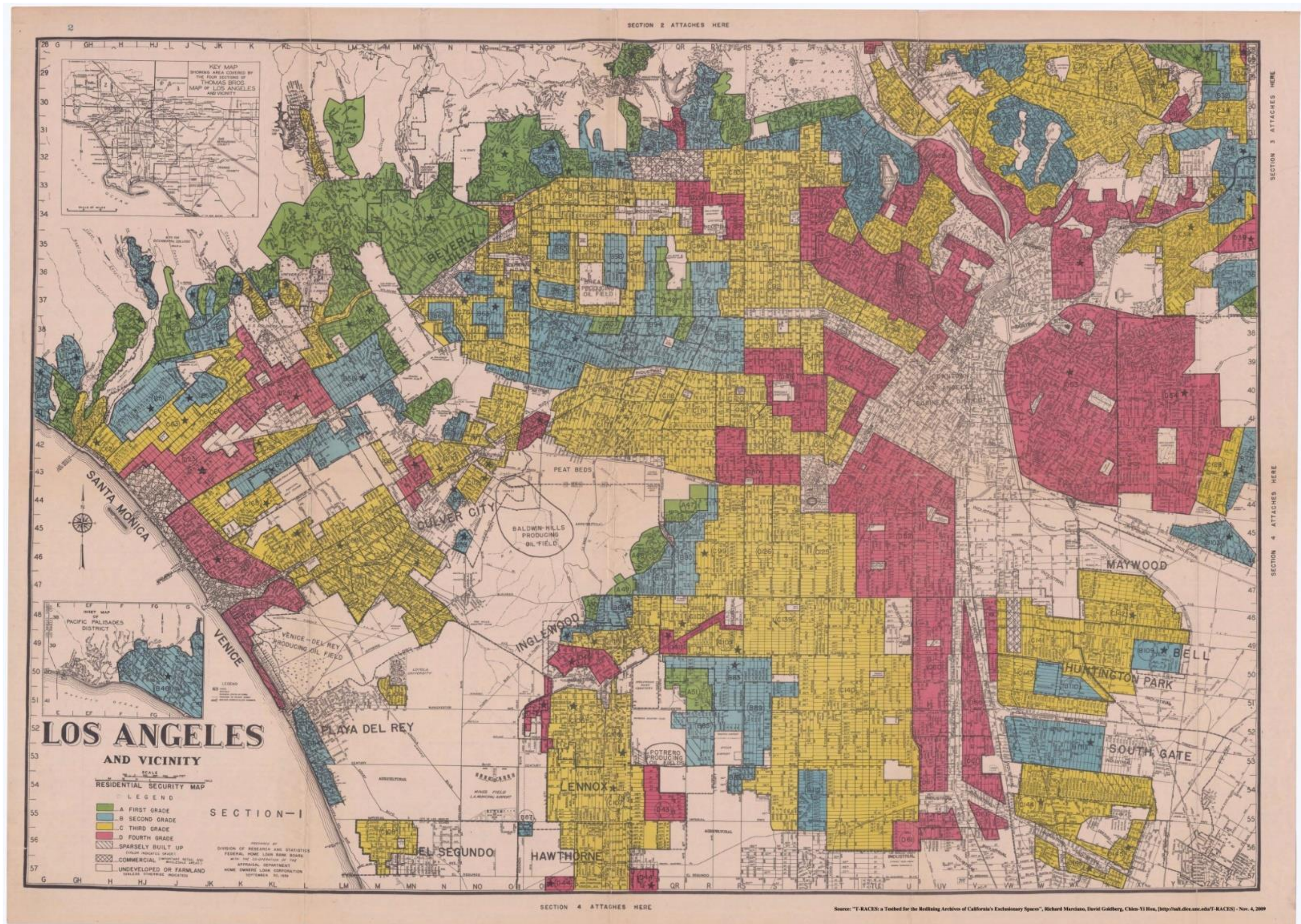
Racial Dot Map of LA, 2010



Source: *https://edition.cnn.com/interactive/2021/us/census-race-ethnicity-map/*

This map has been removed from the Demographic Research Group's web page, because it is no longer accurate. See: https://demographics.coopercenter.org/racial-dot-map for more information. However, it is useful to get a sense of how much (or little) that changed during the 70 years between the maps from 1939 and 1940, and this one. And what we see, is that the concentration of African Americans has moved towards Inglewood and Compton.

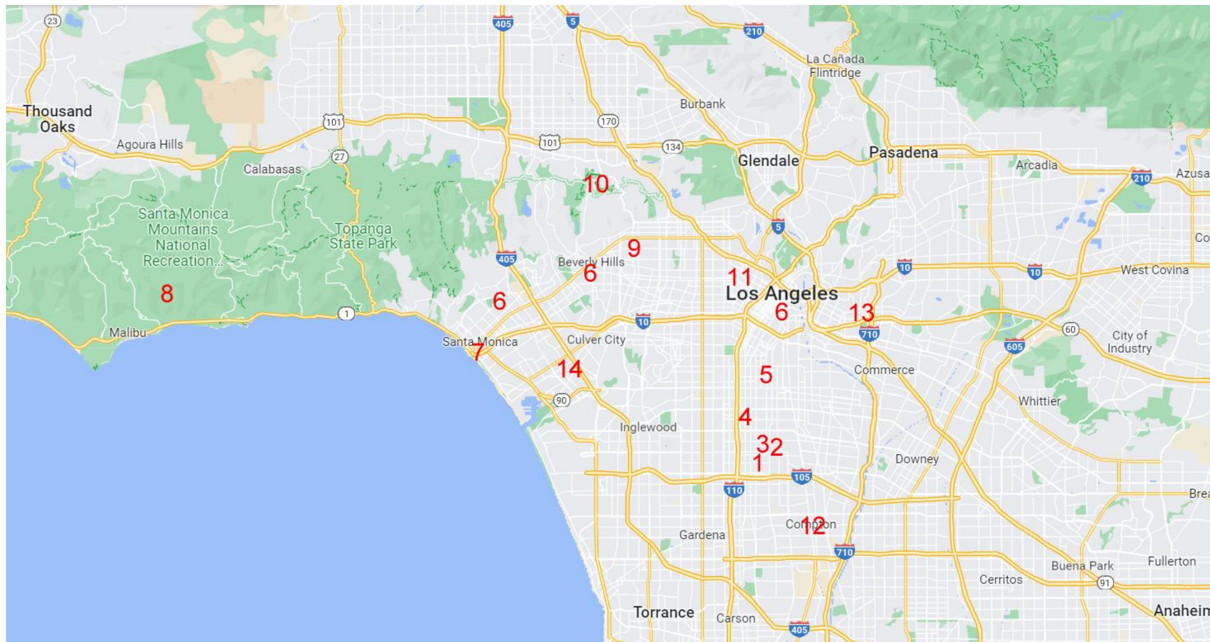
Map of redlined neighbourhoods in LA in 1939



Source: https://jimbotimes.com/2018/04/25/redlining-in-los-angeles-watts/

The Home Ownership Loan Corporation began making redlined maps in 1937, and the reason for doing so was to segment neighbourhoods based on the perceived risks associated with lending money to these neighbourhoods, by mortgage lenders. The red areas are considered "Hazardous" (or a D) and are areas that were predominantly occupied by African Americans. For more see: https://www.lisc.org/jacksonville/regional-stories/understanding-demographics-behind-redlining/

Map of notable places in *Devil in a Blue Dress*



1: Easy's Home (p.46)

2: Joppy's Bar (p.4)

3: John's Speakeasy (p.25)

4: Police Station (p.70)

5: Ernest's Barbershop (p.132)

6: Places Easy worked with Primo (p.181)

7: Santa Monica Pier (p.52)

8: Albright's Hideout (p.199)

9: Mr. Carter and Mr. Baxter's Offices (Lion Investment) (p.111)

10: Richard's Apartment (p.93)

11: Albright's Office (p.13)

12: Coretta's auntie and Dupree's sister (Compton) (p.66 & p.172)

13: East L.A. (El Barro) (p.180)

14: Ricardo's Pool Room on Slauson (p.125)

This is a modern map of LA, and *Devil in a Blue Dress* is a fictional novel set in 1948, thus some of the places that is mentioned in the novel may not exist anymore or they have never existed. This does not retract anything form the purpose of this map, which is to show how much Easy crossed geographical racial fault lines. Some of the places on the map are close approximations of where the place would be. (Examples: Albright's Office is on Alvarado, which is a street, so the point on the map is close to the middle of that street. The point that is for Compton is also just placed in the middle of Compton.) A place that is not placed on the map that could be considered important is the motel (The Sunridge) where Daphne hides at one point in "south side of L.A." (p.175) because the neighbourhood is mostly Mexican.

However, south side of L.A. is so close to some of the other points on the map, and according to Easy: “That was back in 1948, before Mexicans and black people started hating each other. Back then, before ancestry had been discovered, a Mexican and a Negro considered themselves the same.” (p.181) Thus, it does not add enough to warrant a point on the map.

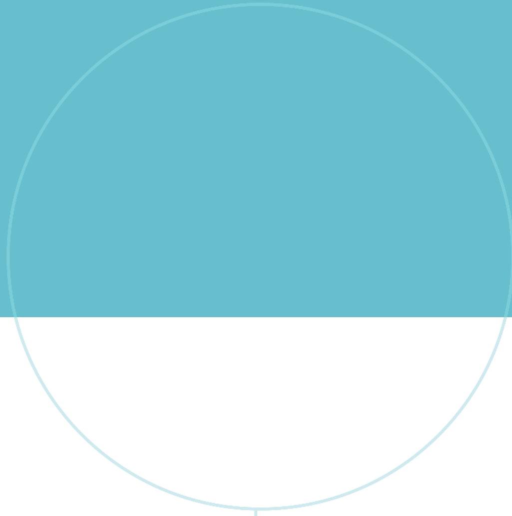
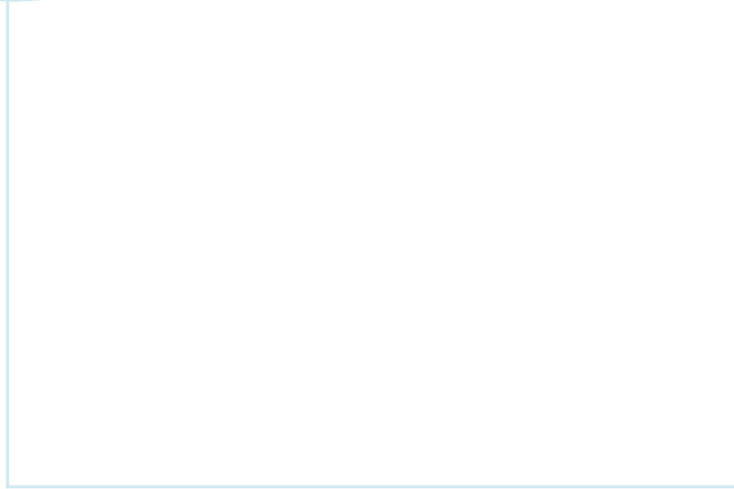
Appendix 5: Relevance for the Teaching Profession

As this thesis is written as a part of the Language Studies with Teacher Education program at NTNU, I must establish how it is relevant in a classroom context. This work has contributed to my competence as a teacher, as it has required me to engage with literature closely (and can be used as a teaching tool in a classroom. For example: use it to review sources, as I engage with multiple types of sources throughout the thesis).

As a modern teacher in Norway, it is crucial to be able to work interdisciplinary, and this thesis is itself interdisciplinary (it engages primarily with English and History). As an English and History teacher, it is important to be able to convey the importance of different perspectives as a pillar of the democratic work that is a part of the core curriculum (democracy and citizenship). This thesis can also be used to engage with multiple of the core values of the education and training part of the core curriculum, such as Human dignity, Identity and cultural diversity, and Critical thinking and ethical awareness (because it can be used by students in order to investigate topics from multiple perspectives).[71]

African American fiction can also be used in both macro- and micro-history as a part of in-depth learning (dybdelæring), while also engaging students with literature. The use of literature in the classroom can be a motivating way to engage with language learning, through reading and listening. Despite the Emancipation Proclamation being over 150 years old, the remnants of American slavery are still prevalent in American society, but also globally (because of globalization). Topics such as racism, discrimination, human rights, and others discussed in this thesis are still relevant today and should be considered crucial points of discussion in classrooms today (and most likely, in years to come).

[71] Work Cited: https://www.udir.no/lk20/overordnet-del/?lang=eng

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