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Hard-Boiled Reinvestigations of African American History in Barbara Neely's *Blanche on the Lam* (1992) and *Blanche Among the Talented Tenth* (1994)

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ABSTRACT

Barbara Neely's first two hard-boiled novels manifest features of contemporary narratives of slavery. The paper investigates the hybrid and seemingly ambiguous co-presence of two generic traditions in Neely: the hard-boiled crime novel's lonely detective hero and scepticism are contrasted to the neo-slave narrative's trickster protagonist and hopeful stance. The paper demonstrates that the hybrid presence of the two generic traditions withstands a binary logic of social scepticism versus hope. Neely's novels trace a personal strategy of social resistance performed by Blanche White, Neely's black female detective, who fights institutional racism via individual acts of speaking out and producing alternative knowledge. (ÁZSK)

KEYWORDS: African American detective fiction, hard-boiled crime novel, neo-slave narrative, African American history, Mammy stereotype, talented tenth

Introduction

Contemporary African American women's historical fiction rewrites mainstream accounts of African American history from the perspective of African Americans. These rewritings offer alternative descriptions of historically experienced social injustice. Among many fictional forms and genres, it is particularly the classical slave narrative that is revisited. In a classical slave narrative a runaway slave recounts their escape from the South and travels to the North; liberation is achieved geographically, psychologically, and spiritually. From the 1970s to the early 1990s, African American authors were engaged in reshaping antebellum slave narratives in the form of neo-slave narratives with the aim to fill in some gaps in historical accounts available about the psychological, emotional, and bodily experiences of enslaved African Americans. Within this, bodily and affective experiences of enslaved women are often targeted, as in Octavia Butler's

Kindred (1979), Shirley Anne Williams's *Dessa Rose* (1986), Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), and Ishmael Reed's satiric *Flight to Canada* (1976).[1]

This paper investigates hybrid intersections of African American crime fiction and the neo-slave narrative in the 1990s. Instead of well-known texts, the investigation of hybridity relies on the example of Barbara Neely's hard-boiled crime novels and their treatment of African American racial history. Social activist and author Barbara Neely published four detective novels featuring the African American professional maid and amateur detective Blanche White. These novels survey specific issues and locations of African American history in the framework of the female hard-boiled detective story. *Blanche on the Lam* (1992) addresses white supremacy in the rural South. *Blanche Among the Talented Tenth* (1994) investigates intraracial racism in the Northeast in the 1980s, while *Blanche Cleans Up* (1998) focuses on environmental racism in metropolitan areas. The last book, *Blanche Passes Go* (2000), returns to the South and looks into the sexual abuse of Black women in the 1990s.

Neely's novels are normally discussed as female hard-boiled crime novels[2] but they manifest additional generic features. In an excellent essay about Neely's first novel, Rosemary V. Hathaway (2005) stated that three generic traditions intersect in Neely: the slave narrative, the crime novel, and the novel of passing (321). Hathaway added that with "its contemporary setting, *Blanche on the Lam* is clearly not a slave narrative in the strict sense, I view it as a sort of neo-slave narrative" (322), but she did not elaborate. As a follow-up to Hathaway's idea, the present paper explores how neo-slave features permeate *Blanche on the Lam* and its sequel, *Blanche Among the Talented Tenth*. Neely's Colored female detective investigates cases that are related to long histories of racial discrimination, and the detection process targets gaps of knowledge about the racial past, which makes Neely's detective investigations of racial history very similar to the neo-slave narratives of the eighties. Drawing on Hathaway's investigations on *Lam*, the paper explores a basic incompatibility between the neo-slave narrative and the hard-boiled crime novel. Hathaway found a duality not only of genres, but also of approaches in Neely's representation of African American characters in *Blanche on the Lam*, when in her conclusion she located an ongoing "blend of optimism of the slave narrative and the skepticism of the hard-boiled detective who knows that 'justice' is not a specific destination but an ongoing and deeply personal project" (331) in the novel.[3]

Hathaway's insistence on the blend of optimism and skepticism in crime fiction can be read in the context of the criticism of neo-slave narratives. Since the 1990s, much of the reception of neo-slave narratives has largely focused on the regenerative, healing, communally fortifying aspects of narratives of the painful racial past. As a case in point, Ashraf. H. Rushdy's magisterial essay on *Beloved* describes how two daughters of a traumatized slave mother process their legacy differently—how the regenerative approach serves survival better than that of spiteful revenge ("Daughters" 581). Similarly, Dorothea Fischer-Hornung and Monika Mueller view the relationship between the hard-boiled tradition and ethnic literature as a turn towards positive endings: they claim that in ethnic detective stories, the ethnic communal part tends to dominate the sleuthing (12). In contrast to such an approach, Hathaway's documentation of slave narrative-related hope and hard-boiled fiction-related skepticism in Neely's books targets a scenario with a need for regeneration where the processing fails to take place. At this point, two questions emerge: when the neo-slave narrative meets the hard-boiled crime novel in Neely, how do hopes for processing the painful past mix with skeptical reflections on an incorrigible social order; and how does it impact the regeneration process?

The paper examines the blend of neo-slave hope and hard-boiled skepticism in Neely's *Blanche on the Lam* and *Blanche and the Talented Tenth*. In the first, the stereotype of the Mammy character is shown from a new perspective. In the second, W. E. B. Du Bois's notion of the "Talented Tenth," the basic progressive idea that education is the way out of slavery and racial discrimination, is scrutinized and put into a new historical perspective. The intersection of the neo-slave narrative tradition and the hard-boiled tradition in these two volumes offers little hope for processing the past.

Defining the hard-boiled crime novel and the neo-slave narrative

As is known, the hard-boiled detective story is focused on character representation rather than plot twists. It centers on the figure of the independent private investigator with his idiosyncratic code of honor enmeshed in a valueless society. The hero of "realistic mystery fiction" (Chandler 13–14) searches for "a hidden truth" and his attitude and actions are more interesting than his ways of thinking (18). A private detective is also a person who balances between the criminal world and the world of official institutions of justice, and criticizes the injustices of a violent world in an ironic tone, the gutter talk of decrepit metropolitan settings.

Commenting on the hard-boiled dick's attitude, actions, and language, Sean McCann states that this vision performs a critique of liberalism in that it "displace[s] the centrality of the individual with an emphasis on the significance of the state and the problems of 'social control' that the state exemplified" (18–19). Or, as Daylanne English puts it, "[i]n the hard-boiled crime novel, the detective offers sceptical reflections on a social scenario in which modern democracy breaks down" (774).

How does this relate to African American hard-boiled stories? McCann states that "the traditional preoccupation" of the hard-boiled genre with legal failures and injustices offered "a perfect means to dramatize the intimate relations between racism and American democracy" (252).[4] In particular, Chester Himes used the hard-boiled frame in the 1940s and 50s, his detectives roamed the streets of Harlem. Thirty years later, Walter Mosley wrote historical hard-boiled stories, his war veteran private eye stalked Los Angeles in the 1950s–60s like Chandler's Marlowe prowled downtown LA in the 1930s–40s—but Mosley's mean streets are located in the African American neighborhood of Watts. In the 1990s, several Black women writers like Eleanor Taylor Bland, Barbara Neely, Valerie Wilson Wesley, and Nikki Baker relied on the hard-boiled formula to criticize the racial and gender bias of the US legal system (Reddy 41–42). A consensus has emerged that "much ethnic detective fiction has imbedded in it strategies for exposing the social and economic disparities that ethnic Americans face" (Goeller 149).

Neo-slave narratives from the 1970s–1990s rewrite pre-civil war classical slave narratives imaginatively. Classical slave narratives presented autobiographical accounts of the tribulations of lives under slavery and achieving freedom in the form of "residually oral, modern narratives of escape from bondage to freedom" (Bell, *Afro-American Novel* 289). In slave narratives, the critical commentary of the peculiar institution and the white owners happened more on the level of documentation than explicit commentary. As Toni Morrison famously put it, "proceedings too terrible to relate" are missing from or are left unexplained in the classical slave narratives (91). In contrast, late twentieth-century neo-slave narratives aim to explicate exactly these emotional and psychological gaps: they counterbalance "the absence of interior life, the deliberate excising of it from the records that the slave themselves told" (90) and tell about the interior life of enslaved people who strive for freedom. Ashraf H. Rushdy defined neo-slave narratives as first-person accounts of historical journeys to freedom, which use the format of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century

slave narratives to articulate cultural and political questions of the Civil Rights era (*Neo-Slave Narratives* 6). Arlene R. Keizer used the term "contemporary narratives of slavery" because she extended the notion to include not only historical novels, but also novels about the present that are related to racial history or address the social aftermath of slavery today (11). Keizer argued that these novels use stories of slavery to theorize Black subjectivity: they both problematize the relation of Black subjectivity to resistance and question a progressive notion of African American history that disregards the effects slavery still has on the present.[5]

The intersection of the neo-slave narrative and the hard-boiled crime novel creates a liminal textual space between the two genres in which the criminal investigation aims at ripping the veil from the mystery of historical gaps of knowledge that are related to the continued effect of slavery on the social performances of African American subjectivities today.

The reinterpretation of the Mammy type in Neely's *Blanche on the Lam*

Neo-slave narratives repurpose many racial stereotypes, one of which is the character of the Mammy, the dark-skinned, middle-aged, overweight (stout), faithful house servant of a Southern white family, who organizes the life of the generations she serves.[6] The Mammy figure has come down from nineteenth-century fiction, most notably from Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), and has been preserved by Margaret Mitchell's Mammy in *Gone with the Wind* (1936), and William Faulkner's Dilsey in *The Sound and the Fury* (1929)—in works by white authors. The Mammy type has been reinterpreted by African American authors: contemporary representations give Mammy a name, allow her to tell her story, and even share her emotions. For instance, in Octavia Butler's *Kindred*, the Mammy character, Sarah (the cook), voices her bitterness and anger over her former sexual exploitation and the selling of her children. She has only one child left, a deaf-and-dumb—and thus not marketable—daughter.

The traditional Mammy character of the slave narrative is recycled in Barbara Neely's first hard-boiled detective novel, *Blanche on the Lam*.[7] In the case of this hybrid revision of the Mammy, the first question is how Blanche the female back detective twists the stereotype; second, what healing or subversive potential the Mammy disguise may have for her. The Mammy role seems to offer social invisibility for Blanche to do her

detective work, which eventually enables her to turn the power relations between Black and white characters upside down.

Blanche's ironic version of Mammy

Neely's *Blanche on the Lam* retains many features of the traditional slave narrative. It is about Blanche's fleeing from an unjust court sentence, and her days as a domestic worker at a wealthy family in the country (who are ex-plantation and ex-slave owners). She hopes to escape but deceives her employers to make them believe she wants to stay. In the end, she flees by bus to Boston. Blanche White is a professional hired help in the 1990s; the Mammy type fits her race (Black), class (working-class), gender (female), age (forty-plus), body (stout), and job (domestic work). Her wealthy employers expect her to behave entirely in terms of the type, and she is happy to act out Mammy for them while she remains invisible as a person. As a result, her employers cannot see her because they see Mammy, the type she self-consciously stands for.

However, as her doubly white name ironically attests, the jet-Black Blanche does not conform to social expectations, especially not to those of the Mammy stereotype. Although Blanche often assists employers by hiding behind the Mammy type, her actions define her as distinctly un-Mammy-like. Blanche resorts to the Mammy appearance by acting clueless in situations she does not wish to engage in. She does not play along when an employer comes to the kitchen with "Mammy save me eyes," that is, seeking advice (Neely, *Lam* 35). Neither is she smitten by what she calls "Darkies' Disease" (42), an emotional attachment to a white employer many domestic workers suffer from. Instead of getting emotionally involved, Blanche strives to keep her position by reading other characters and sizing up situations. She does this by constantly using analogies—she observes and tries to place what she notices in existing frames. As she sees it, her livelihood and her employment depend on her ability to read people.

Blanche even thinks that she is her own boss since she is free from a direct boss or a watching colleague to answer to, thus needs to be self-reliant. Moreover, she brings order into her employers' lives. Her presence ensures a daily routine of meals, a plan about menus, frequent changes of bedding, regular laundering and ironing, daily dustings and ordering, and extra preparations for entertainment. So, she maintains order in many senses of the term: she not only scrubs the floors or does the rooms but, more importantly, she also oversees the family's arrangement of time, household actions, and domestic spaces.

Her relation to domestic space is quite revealing in this regard. Houses speak to Blanche as if they had personalities. Rooms tell about their inhabitants' character; small objects provide information (13–4). Early in the story, she observes an ambiguity between what rooms tell about family members and what they want to tell about themselves. The wife's room is painstakingly tidy (77), while the wife acts awkwardly and helplessly. The husband's room looks like the mess of a slob (74), while he acts like a well-groomed gentleman. Only the nephew's room is in sync with the public behavior of its inhabitant: it is the room of a giant child that smells of chocolate and machine oil (73).

Ordering the life of her employers includes tricking or fooling them without them noticing. Blanche reads characters and situations to turn them to her advantage. She gauges her reaction appropriately for the given situation and provides the expected answers and prompts. Her reactions are always calculated and purposeful: in many cases, she extracts information from her employers without them knowing about it. Another game she plays is being polite with rude employers: she gives herself points for being extra gracious in response to most unkind prompts.

In her job, Blanche hides as Mammy while she acts as her own boss without her employers' knowledge. In other words, she plays on a racial stereotype consciously to turn the white–Black power dynamics upside-down, and much of the irony of the narration results from free indirect comments on this situation. Blanche becomes an all-seeing, all-feeling neo-Mammy character, who plays with the traditional racist use of the stereotype to her advantage.

Mammy Blanche detects

Blanche on the Lam bears several features of the hard-boiled detective story, not least because it relies on simple, slangy language use, and desolate settings. Blanche's daily job of invisibility escalates into a job of detection when she becomes dissatisfied with the work of the police. As a Black woman detective, she gets involved in the case emotionally, and eventually, she must defend her own life from the criminal.

There is a reason behind Blanche's dissatisfaction with law enforcement agencies. She flees from a racially biased jurisdiction in the first place when she runs from her unjust prison sentence (1–3). She remembers her time in NYC and police brutality there (79). She recalls the case when the murder of a Black boy by a white one became a police case of Black

aggression (144). On top of that, she thinks all Southern policemen are descendants of overseers and paddyrollers (79).

At her domestic hiding place, Blanche's detective activity is triggered by the uninvestigated murder of a fellow African American, the gardener, Nate. They have formerly got on well, Blanche has noticed how exquisitely Nate performs the Uncle Tom stereotype, while Nate has noted how exquisitely Blanche performs the Mammy type (82), and they share their joy over their satire of the one-dimensional types (Mickle 78). Yet Nate warns Blanche not to notice or try to understand what is happening in the house: an idea Blanche cannot take seriously. Blanche's wish to know what she is not being told intensifies because Nate is silenced by the second murder in the case.

Blanche utilizes her social invisibility as the stereotypical Mammy in her detective work. She not only disappears behind the stereotype, but also acts as a Night Girl, a role she learnt as a child. Blanche learnt to disappear into the night thanks to her coal-Black skin, and during her nighttime wanderings, she got informed about neighborhood issues so well that even her mother thought she had second sight (53). Together with her invisibility as Night Girl, she relies on her excellent information processing skills: she observes, draws analogies, conducts room searches, and extracts information personally. In addition, she relies on African American alternative news sources: her old friend's, Miz Minnie's network of African American informants and their unrecorded evidence.

The solution she finds proves to be dangerous. First, the villain, Grace, tries to kill her to silence her, trying to butcher her. Then, when Grace's violent attempts at silencing Blanche fail because Blanche manages to knock her out—the family lawyer-cousin Archibald calls the district attorney, a family relation, to prevent the investigation of the case and the previous incidents, which he hushes successfully. At this point, it would still be dangerous for Blanche personally to let on her knowledge about Grace's murderous actions.

The neo-slave element: Using invisibility for newly forged racial identification

So far, it has been argued that while Blanche's social invisibility allows for the investigation of murder cases, it equally results in the acquisition of unwanted knowledge silenced by her employers' elite white family members. I want to suggest that despite the recurrent scenes of invisibility and silencing, there are two elements of the story in which the

possibility of interracial visibility and communication emerges against all odds.

The first chance is Blanche's connection to cousin Mumsfield who suffers from Mosaicism. This is a genetic disorder in which two or more groups of cells in a person possess a different genetic makeup ("What is Mosaicism?"). In Mumsfield, it results in mosaic Down's syndrome: intellectual delays and disabilities accompanied by weak muscles and a flat facial structure. The illness is visible and makes Mumsfield recognizably different, which leads to his social exclusion: being laughed at, ignored, or subjected to fake interest. Blanche realizes that his condition makes Mumsfield as socially invisible as she is because of her skin color and profession (91). At the same time, Mumsfield excels at activities he is attuned to: he is an excellent driver and can fix any broken-down machine. He is sensitive and observant, can mimic others expertly, and is always full of impressions. Blanche understands that Mumsfield sees things with fresh eyes and takes delight in the simple aspects of life. Blanche would have liked to see the world the way he saw it (93). They develop a connection quickly as they begin to appreciate each other.

Mumsfield is the only one in Blanche's white employers' family who can see her as a person. Yet she is startled by their budding familiarity and affection. She can feel Mumsfield's presence physically, the way she can feel her family members, and she disapproves of this (111). Whatever the case, Mumsfield is white and male, therefore he has nothing to do with Blanche's inner familiar circle. In addition, Blanche herself is repulsed by the idea that she has a white male upper-class friend as she has a "constitutional distaste for being a white man's Mammy" (192) and she cannot tolerate emotional proximity to Mumsfield. She wonders at herself feeling close to him: "Had the slavers stamped mammyism into her genes when they raped her great grandmothers? If they had, she was determined to prove the power of will over blood" (161). Blanche thinks it is her duty not to be emotionally attached to Mumsfield because of his race, class, and gender, despite his medical condition and social outsider position. Therefore, Blanche resists the emerging interracial affective connection rationally.[8]

The second chance to overcome invisibility occurs with family lawyer-cousin Archibald. He used to be a Civil Rights lawyer in the 60s but this does not stop him from treating African Americans as invisible, or from placing the reputation of the family beyond the value of administering justice. Blanche decides to subject Archibald to a procedure she calls the de-jackassing process, which comes in short and long versions. Take a jackass,

a racist white male, upper-class or redneck, who overdoes the stereotyping, for instance calls the ageing woman "girl" or pretends the colored person understands nothing they can hear. There is a need for teaching a lesson, to start de-jackassing. The short version includes a quick humiliation, for instance threatening to shrivel the penis of the delivery boy by African magic. The long version involves repeated sessions of logical speech, for instance with Archibald, with whom Blanche needs to negotiate business, making him realize that Blanche can think logically (187).

The de-jackassed Archibald offers Blanche a deal. Blanche is to stay with Mumsfield for good money in exchange for remaining silent about the identity of the murderer. Blanche asks for a good salary, for a minimum of ten years, as she needs to secure the education of her kids. She also wants social security, and she even asks for a pension plan. Archibald agrees to all her conditions, but Blanche does not accept the terms eventually because she sees the money as hush money. Instead, she steps down for much less and thus has the chance to talk about her findings to an Atlanta journalist before she flees to Boston.

Invisibility makes Blanche able to act as a detective and find out about a crime that would otherwise never come to light. She even reveals a secret criminal history when she glimpses a line of earlier crimes committed by Grace, which were never revealed. In other words, Blanche can produce knowledge about her white employers that would be socially censored under normal circumstances. Yet it is difficult for her to tell her story and make it heard. Instead of official jurisdiction, she must resort to the media to ensure the criminal is punished or at least not allowed to roam free. By relying on an alternative route to administering justice, Blanche turns the traditional Black criminal–white detective pair into the less likely Black detective–white criminal combination.

Is there a chance of healing or regeneration offered by this turn? Not in the sense of healing as the absence of illness. There is very little chance for reconciliation with white men like Archibald and Mumsfield, which Blanche rejects. After solving and surviving the case, she feels battered but also strengthened. The limited choice of action she has is used to the maximum when she ensures that Grace remains in a mental institution through publicizing the solution to the crime and she willingly escapes to the North to save her skin afterwards. Yet, at the end of the day, she is left in the same precarious position she started with at the beginning of the story and begins from scratch in the next book. From the perspective of the blending of neo-slave narrative hope and hard-boiled skepticism, this

suggests that the hopeful healing neo-slave narratives offer remains limited at the hybrid intersection of the two genres *Blanche on the Lam* provides.

Detecting racial mysteries in *Blanche Among the Talented Tenth*

Blanche and the Talented Tenth is Neely's second novel which focuses on issues of intraracial racism, the relation of race and class, and racial education. The novel criticizes W. E. B. Du Bois's progressive idea of the "Talented Tenth," and shows its connection to intraracial racism in a historical context. The detective in this case investigates the life mysteries of members of the elite group of African Americans who belong to the "Talented Tenth," and disentangles their secret personal histories in the past decades. The neo-slave narrative elements of the book target questions of racial history and become inseparably entangled with the detective story that evolves in the present: the present mystery can only be unraveled by understanding the racial history of the past differently.

The hard-boiled aspect of the novel develops through a complicated mystery that involves three deaths at an elite and secluded holiday resort for African Americans on the shores of Maine. Blanche White gets involved in the case when a guest is killed and soon after that, her new friend's, Mattie's, godson commits suicide, which arouses the suspicion that he might have been the perpetrator. When Mattie asks Blanche to investigate the matter to prove the godson was not implicated in the murder, Blanche's curiosity and detective instincts are aroused, and she sets out to find out connections. As she checks the guests, she notes a very strong color prejudice among members of the wealthy and educated group of African Americans. She also finds that practically every member of the local set has something to hide from their privileged friends.

Mattie, Blanche's new friend and benefactor, also turns out different from the placid self-reliant front she presents. She is a celebrated African American woman intellectual who writes about the needed self-respect of African American women. Yet Blanche learns that in her actual life, she had many a good reason for little self-respect: she made numerous degrading compromises with the white world throughout her life. One of these is related to her white husband, who was extremely wealthy and treated her to an expensive upper-class lifestyle. In exchange, he preyed on her ideas and included her arguments in his books without reference. Also, she allowed her sons to be brought up by their white grandparents and grow distant from her. As part of the deal, Mattie was also allowed to have a secret, Colored lover, with whom she even had a baby. The child was passed off as

the son of one of Mattie's friends, so Mattie's maternity remained undisclosed until Blanche's detection.

Blanche gets involved in the case personally. Not only does she dislike the all-pervading color prejudice that seems to permeate all aspects of the mystery, but she is also physically implicated when the criminal knocks her over in a fight for an important piece of evidence. Blanche nurses her wound and she grows afraid, and from this point on she needs to locate the culprit to defend her own personal safety, too. She relies on a network of acquaintances to help her do historical research and finds the culprit: the secret stepbrother of Mattie's secret son, a member of the holiday set. When he realizes he has been found out, the man commits suicide by sailing out to sea and drowning himself there. He does not wait for official justice to reach him.

Freedom to fill the gaps in racial history

The historical gap-filling task in the book is related not only to the characters' lives, but also to W. E. B. Du Bois's theory of social uplift. Du Bois's famous concept of the "Talented Tenth" comes from his 1903 essay published in *The Negro Problem*, in which Du Bois delineates his idea of racial advancement. He thought the African American community needed educated people in leadership positions. These leaders, he claimed, should be college-educated persons with a classical education: they could represent the African American race politically and initiate social change as well, a feat that manual laborers can never achieve (43). The social uplift of African Americans generally could only be performed by this college-educated segment, with trained living human souls (59), who could represent the other 90% democratically to achieve the political interests of African Americans.

Du Bois's notion of the social mission of the "Talented Tenth" for the betterment of their community contrasted starkly with B. T. Washington's idea of racial compromise in his Atlanta Address in 1895. Washington propagated practical or industrial education for African Americans, and he offered a social compromise: he proposed no political or social aims for the African American community in exchange for material advancement or "the commercial world" (Washington 220). In contrast to the politically motivated Du Bois, Washington's method for uplift was focused on economic success, a gradual economic strengthening for African Americans in the present that may trigger social change in the future.

In Neely's novel, the term "Talented Tenth" refers to the elite group of light-skinned African Americans who populate the elegant holiday resort in the 1990s. The members of this set are extremely Color-conscious and wealthy; in most cases, their privileges are inherited from their parents—and even from their runaway ancestors, who crossed to Canada for safety before the Civil War and returned after. The present elite are educated and intelligent but represent nobody politically, they do not give up their interests for the sake of the community; they would rather live with their petty or tragic secrets than see those leaking out. For instance, African American Feminist Mattie hides her secret maternity, which was the result of her unhappy marriage. Mattie never thought that the events of her secret compromise, which she wanted to conceal forever, would be uncovered by the private investigation. When Blanche finds out about the compromising details, she challenges Mattie face-to-face, and the two friends become arch enemies. Mattie uses Blanche as a practical tool, as a private investigator, and drops her when the findings become too personal and hurting.

The question of the benefits of a good education comes up in connection with Blanche's adopted children as well. The children go to an elite Boston private school Blanche pays for from the proceeds of her first investigation. However, Blanche dislikes the way her children learn to socialize in school. Her eleven-year-old daughter puts on airs: she wants straightened hair, she looks down on poor and dark-skinned people. Blanche White, being jet Black and poor, finds it a hard pill to swallow that good education brings with it this plethora of color prejudice. After the case, she moves her kids to a different school following the summer in Maine, the third book reveals.

Talented Tenth displays hybrid intersections of the hard-boiled crime novel and the neo-slave narrative. On the one hand, Blanche acts as the perfect African American hard-boiled detective: she is called in privately, she gets involved, she needs to perform as a trickster, and she is unable to secure an official status to her solution, the case is solved by private arrangement and remains open publicly. On the other hand, the neo-slave narrative is present as well, not so much as a contemporary narrative of slavery but rather through revealing gaps of historical knowledge related to racial prejudice. The detection unraveled stories of compromised race relations and showed that education does not help solve racial prejudice but may even make it worse—as exemplified by the story of Mattie and her sons.

From the perspective of potential healing, the privately arranged solution in *Talented Tenth* does not offer a racially rewarding or empowering solution to a crime motivated by intraracial prejudice. Blanche finds the solution to the crime that no one wished to hear, least of all the privileged, light-skinned, and wealthy members of the contemporary "Talented Tenth." In this scenario, Blanche's possible actions are limited to her personal responses: she falls out with Mattie's set and moves her kids to a state school to shield them from the intraracial bias of public schools.

Conclusion

Barbara Neely's detective novels help reconsider the history of the African American past from the perspective of African Americans. In particular, the stereotypical notion of the Mammy character and the "Talented Tenth" are reinterpreted in the first two books of her Blanche White-series. This paper has explored how crime novels rely on the neo-slave narrative genre and what healing or subversive potential the investigations of Neely's black female hard-boiled detective carry. Blanche's social invisibility and her perspective on elite education are targeted throughout her race-, gender-, class-, and age-related investigations.

First and foremost, the paper demonstrated the presence of the neo-slave narrative in Neely's detective novels. The two novels feature investigations in the present concerning the effects of slavery today, as Keizer's category of contemporary narratives of slavery defines it. Perhaps more importantly, the study explored an assumed ambiguity between skepticism and hope in Neely's hybrid texts: it set out to find out whether the detective novels retained the skepticism of hard-boiled stories or the hope element of neo-slave narratives in connection with the problem of historical racism. Initially, this issue was posed as an either-or question, but a thorough analysis of the books suggested that skepticism and hope do not function as mutually exclusive qualities in Neely's first two books. Indeed, these function side by side in *Blanche on the Lam* and *Blanche Among the Talented Tenth,* even if on different levels. Social institutions such as schools, hospitals, or the police preserve race prejudice—in the face of these, one is helpless. Yet, on the level of individual action, one can redress racial bias. In the case of Blanche's investigations, there is no official solution in either case but a private settling of the criminal problem by agreement or suicide. In *Blanche on the Lam*, the detective experiences racial invisibility as a modern runaway Mammy, and relies on her invisibility in detection. Her findings are officially ignored but she finds an alternative way to make them public in

the media. This means she does not accept the status quo and must save her skin again: she refuses the chance of a well-paying long-term job and flees to Boston instead. In *Talented Tenth* Blanche's analytical skills are invisible to members of her race, who belong to the Talented Tenth, and look down on her working-class existence. Despite expectations of failure, she solves the case by unraveling long histories of racial strife, but again, she is expected not to make all her findings public. In response to this, she moves her kids from the private school that represents the continuity of the legacy of the Talented Tenth and the colorism that comes with it. In other words, Blanche solves the problem of intraracial racism on a personal level, as she cannot handle it otherwise.

Barbara Neely's first two novels perform a hybrid fusion of the hard-boiled detective story and the neo-slave narrative tradition, in which the chances for a hopeful resolution of racially motivated social conflict remain very low. In this regard, Neely's ethnic detective stories do not disclose a focus on the positive healing potential of ethnic storytelling (12), as Fischer-Hornung and Mueller found, but rather, function as ironic personal commentaries on structural racism in society at large. If they allow for regenerative action, it is only on the level of the individual detective's personal decisions of resistance within the scope of her family relations, not so much in communal action.

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This essay is part of the block *Hybridisation and Generic Experiments in Crime Narratives*.

Notes

1. Recently a new wave of neo-slave narratives has appeared in contemporary African American fiction. The neo-slave narrative has arguably returned in generically mixed ways: this hybridity can be thought of as including genres and styles of writing in a broad sense. The hybrid use of the neo-slave narrative culminated in Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* (2016), in which a sentimental strategy of writing the slave narrative is rewritten through conventions of a realist strategy of narrating the slave past (Friedman, "Unsentimental" 118; Li 22–23). Following the strategy of the sentimental approach, Ta-Nehisi Coates's *The Water Dancer* (2019) integrates magical elements into its narrative about an escape from slavery, and so does Jesmyn Ward's *Let Us Descend* (2023), which combines the neo-slave narrative with an epic, Dantean descent to hell.

2. Bernard W. Bell refers to extremely popular African American sci-fi, detective and romance novels as contemporary "paraliterature" (*The Contemporary African American Novel* 333), borrowing the term from Samuel Delany.

3. Social activist and author Barbara Neely published four detective novels featuring the African American professional maid and amateur detective Blanche White. Neely's further two detective novels could not be included in this discussion due to limited space, but they also offer explorations of race and history relevant to the intersection of crime fiction and historical reinterpretation. *Blanche Cleans Up* (1998) maps versions of African American masculinity and historical forms of prejudice against these. At the same time, *Blanche Passes Go* (2000) reveals Blanche's own personal and family history via her investigation of her rape by a rich white man. These novelistic investigations perform further generic hybridity and eventually provide local personal solutions to social issues.

4. According to the first book on African American detective fiction, the African American detective performs acts of deception and mocking similar to those of the vernacular trickster figure of African American novels (33). Andrew Pepper complicates Soitos's celebration of subversion when he writes that African American crime stories "might simultaneously give voice to the socially and politically marginalized and yet also re-inscribe a reactionary politics" ("Black" 212).

5. A famous case of a contemporary rewriting of African American history in the form of a repurposed autobiography of a slave is Toni Morrison's *A Mercy,* in which the seventeenth-century US origins narrative is complicated by the story of emerging slavery (see Kovács 17; Babb 147; Friedman, "Wilderness" 313).

6. There are a handful of basic racist fictional stereotypes about African Americans: firstly, the stereotype of Uncle Tom, the grown male, who is benevolent, religious, and loyal to his white master. Also, there is Sambo, the younger African male, who is incapable of performing complex tasks, or the Mandingo, the sexually insatiable male. Stereotypes about African American women include Jezebel, the alluring promiscuous woman. Another recurring figure is Mammy, the house servant, who is loyal to the family she works for.

7. "On the lam" means "on the run" (*OED*).

8. Subsequent references to Neely's texts use bracketed location identifiers from the 2014 Kindle edition of her collected novels.

9. Andrew Pepper considers Blanche's frayed connection to Mumsfield a case of double-consciousness that relates this incident not only to African American detective authors, but also to the African American literary tradition in general (*Contemporary* 86). To my mind, it is a sad incident that displays a lack of openness on Blanche's part.

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