

1-1999

# The Psychology of Uncertainty: (Re)Inscribing Indeterminacy in Rudolph Fisher's *The Conjure-Man Dies*

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## *Publisher's Statement*

This article first appeared in *Other Voices*, vol. 1, no. 3. <http://www.othervoices.org/1.3/agosselin/harlem.php>.

## Original Published Citation

Gosselin, Adrienne. "The Psychology of Uncertainty: (Re)Inscribing Indeterminacy in Rudolph Fisher's *The Conjure-Man Dies*." *Other Voices*, vol. 1, no. 3. <http://www.othervoices.org/1.3/agosselin/harlem.php>

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ISSN 1094-2254

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The (e)Journal of Cultural Criticism

## The Psychology of Uncertainty: (Re)Inscribing Indeterminacy in Rudolph Fisher's *The Conjure-Man Dies*

Adrienne Gosselin

*Other Voices*, v.1, n.3 (January 1999)



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Like Dashiell Hammett, Rudolph Fisher, author of *The Conjure-Man Dies* (1932) experimented with the clue puzzle format dominating the so-called Golden Age of detective fiction in the 1920s and early 1930s. Also like Hammett, Fisher's experiment involves combining classical detective fiction with elements of the newly developing hard-boiled formula. Among the ways Fisher's experiment is unique is in its transfer of the detective plot to an all-black setting. As a result, *The Conjure-Man Dies* is the first text to replace the “formulaic combination of characters, settings, and events designed to represent a microcosm of middle-class society” (Grella 42) with characters, settings, and events designed to represent a microcosm of urban black society. [1]

The plot of *The Conjure-Man Dies* centers on the murder of N'Gana Frimbo, a Harlem conjure-man who is also an African king and Harvard graduate. Midway into the investigation, the corpse disappears and, shortly thereafter, Frimbo “resurrects” himself, seated in the very chair on which he had been murdered. Unable to convince the police what they mistook for death to be suspended animation, Frimbo offers to assist the police in finding his would-be murderer. Leading the police investigation is Perry Dart, one of the ten black policemen on the Harlem police force and the only black to be promoted from patrolman to detective. Working with Dart is John Archer, a pedantic black physician with a Latinate vocabulary and a penchant for solving crimes. [2] Of equal importance, but overlooked by critics, is Bubber Brown, [3] an ex-sanitation worker turned private investigator, who works to clear his partner, who has been framed for Frimbo's murder. [4] In the course of the investigation, it is discovered that the murdered victim is not the conjure-man but, rather, N'Ogo Frimbo, the conjure-man's assistant and fellow countryman. While Archer and Dart, with assistance from Bubber Brown, pursue Frimbo as the murderer, Frimbo—who is innocent—pursues the real criminal, whom he reveals at the novel's conclusion, but at the cost of his life.

As Joseph McCluskey so astutely observes, at a time when questions of race and representation were largely dependent on notions of “high” and “low” culture, Fisher “risked legitimacy” in writing detective fiction, a form not only not taken seriously by the academy, but also a form that differed from strategies of realism and/or naturalism employed by “serious” writers of the time. Indeed, McCluskey continues,

It is significant that *The Conjure-Man Dies* is rarely treated in discussions of novels written by black Americans. In two of the more provocative surveys, for example, Robert Bone’s *The Negro Novel in America* and Addison Gayle’s *The Way of the New World*, the novel is ignored. (xxxii-xxxiii)

In fact, the novel is omitted from canonical surveys of African American literature until 1987, when it is described as an “incongruous mix of mystery and low comedy” (Bell 140). Even those scholars who have given the novel critical attention focus on the novel’s compliance to formula rather than its cultural implications. The critical tendency begins with Arthur Davis in his 1932 *Opportunity* review. Here, Davis acknowledges *The Conjure-Man Dies* as the “first detective story written by a Negro and the first to have all Negro characters,” but ultimately concludes that “far more important is the fact that this first adventure in this new field is a thoroughly standard one” (320). Nor was Davis alone in his praise of Fisher’s success with the literary formula. On its release, the novel was widely reviewed and received positive coverage in both the white and black press, each of which applaud Fisher’s success in adhering to genre convention. [5] The next critical review of the novel appears in 1948, when literary critic Hugh Gloster discusses Fisher’s choice as “turning away” from “controversial racial issues” to produce a “refreshing creation that compares favorably with other works of its type” (177). The next mention occurs thirty years later in Eleanor Tignor’s 1977 analysis of Fisher’s use of the clue puzzle format. Here, Tignor deconstructs the plot as a “non-racial” mystery, adding that, concerning the time of authorship, “[i]t was probably surprising that a book was written by a Negro without touching upon racial problems in America” (21).

The limitation of such a technical approach is—and continues to be—critical analysis of the novel’s form at the cost of its cultural commentary, demonstrated most recently by Helen Lock’s groundbreaking study of the Afrocentric origins of black detective fiction and the recurrence of such narrative elements in contemporary African American Literature. At the heart of Lock’s deconstruction is the African-derived myth of Osiris, which Lock finds to have “greater cultural resonance and usefulness” for African American writers in expressing “African-American cultural experience and sensibility” (viii). Lock’s study focuses on specific works by Ralph Ellison, Ishmael Reed, and Toni Morrison—*Invisible Man*, *Mumbo Jumbo*, and *Song of Solomon*—to uncover in each characteristics of the Osiris myth and literary patterns repeating detective trajectory dissimilar to the European formula. Lock does pay mention to *The Conjure-Man Dies* as the first black detective novel; however, as do her predecessors, she reads the novel in terms of its adherence to formula. At the same time, Lock faults Fisher for the very thing Davis applauds, in that for Lock, Fisher’s compliance to the genre conventions sacrifices the novel’s “Africanity,” which ultimately costs the novel “the courage of its own ambivalent convictions” (47). Yet I would argue that the “uneasy ambiguity” Lock experiences at the conclusion of *The Conjure-Man Dies* is evoked by the same indeterminacy, or “valorization of possibilities” (33) she identifies in the works of Ellison, Morrison,

and Reed, texts which “work against fixity of signification (viii). Moreover, drawing on Lock's hypothesis, I argue here that, more than “vestigial,” (Lock 43), Fisher’s experiment not only shifts the mythological model at the center of the detective formula, but is the first to infuse indeterminacy into the formula for classical detection, thus altering the nature of the physiological tension on which the formula turns.

## Meaning and Mythological Models

As Lock notes, “however chameleonic its manifestation” (13), the undisputed archetypal source of Eurocentric detective fiction is the story of Oedipus, whose task is to solve a riddle, or mystery, in order to arrive at a (specific) resolution, or truth. For Lock, specificity, or the idea of a “correct” answer, privileges language as the fundamental logocentrism of the Oedipus myth and has the same effect in the Eurocentric detective story. As Lock explains, in classical detective fiction,

everything depends upon the word and upon the correct reading of the word. The process of detection is the process of rejecting misleading signs until the sign is finally united with the signified, this unity assuming and representing ultimate empirical truth—or meaning, which the detective has to ‘read into’ the signs. (17)

Lock’s explication of a fundamental logocentrism evokes other theories deconstructing hegemonic voice in literature, most notably the Bakhtinian construct of traditional stylistic thought, which acknowledges only its own context. As Bakhtin explains, the traditional stylistic absorbs any alternative discourse as “the word of no one in particular” and relegates the unfamiliar as “other, something not to be interacted with but controlled” (276). The authority of traditional stylistics depends on turns on tacit acceptance “organically connected to a past that is felt to be hierarchically higher.... It is not a question of choosing it from among other possible discourses that are its equal” (342).

As is the case of traditional stylistics, “no one argues with” the monologic voice of classical detective fiction, a point emphasized in Lock's assessment of the detective’s position of power. Here, the detective’s mode of interpretation is the only perspective capable of decoding the signs and deriving the single meaning the signs can be allowed to signify. As such, Lock argues, the detective becomes the hegemonic power, and the words the detective embodies become the reader’s only experience of the crime—or its solution. John Cawelti, whose formal analyses of popular genre has been useful rereadings of nineteenth-century African American literature (Tate, 1993), supports Lock's assertion. Indeed, for Cawelti, “truth” as the teleological end is what distinguishes “detective fiction” (even the best of it) from “literature”:

Watching the detective is like watching a skillful artist who is able to take a few odd patches of color and wiggly lines and make a face or a landscape emerge from them. Even though superficially similar, the difference between a detective story and the multiple perspective of a twentieth-century novel remains basic. In the detective story, when we arrive at the detective’s solution, we have arrived at the truth, *the single right perspective and ordering of events*. (89) [emphasis mine]

Yet, as Lock's study reveals, the ideas of “truth” as fixed signification is one of the tenets basic to traditional detective formula challenged by the shift in mythological

models. And while the Osiris and Oedipus myths both turn on a mystery involving murder and a quest for the truth, the Osiris myth resists containment. Indeed, as Lock points out, in the story of Osiris, words are important “not for what they are, but what they are intended to do”; moreover, it is this “lack of specificity” that enables the Osiris myth such “multiplicity of designation” (31).

As a mythological model, the story of Osiris is ground in orature rather than literature. The point is one which demonstrates Tzvetan Todorov’s definition of “new” genre in “The Typology of Detective Fiction,” a structuralist analysis written in the 1960s and one of the first works of criticism on the genre accepted by the academy (Pyrrhonen 1994). As Todorov explains, a new genre is “created around an element which was not obligatory in the old one” (48) and characterized by attributes “not necessarily constituted by the negation of the main features of the old” (52). Although referring to the hard-boiled derivation of the classical formula, Todorov’s explanation is applicable to Lock’s theory of the Afrocentric story of detection, whose mythological model embodies “a different complex of properties, not by necessity logically harmonious with the first form” (52). Certainly, murder and a quest for truth are features shared by both the Osiris and Oedipus myths; less evident are characteristics encompassed within the “different complex of properties.” Indeed, Lock’s observation of the characteristics of Afrocentric detective fiction reveals properties in keeping with Todorov’s definition:

The story of the murder and resurrection of Osiris, then, can be identified with the tradition of African ancestor-myths, and as such it establishes an Afrocentric context in which to explore a point of view—that of the victim of a crime—which can at best be incidental to narratives based upon the Eurocentric Oedipal model (36).

According to Egyptian scholar R.T. Rundle Clark, the story of Osiris reigned in Egyptian cosmology for nearly three thousand years as the symbol of man’s union with nature, including life after death. As Clark points out that “[i]t is not to be expected that so universal and complicated a god would have remained absolutely unchanged throughout three thousand years of worship,” but nevertheless concludes that “the exact parceling out of the various aspects which came from this place” would still be inadequate “to elucidate Osiris’ real nature, for he transcends his origins” (97-98). While versions of the myth vary, similarities are widespread. For example, all versions depict Osiris as a benevolent king and sympathetic figure and all place Set as the villain and jealous brother. All versions also agree that Osiris is the power of growth and reproduction and that he is both dead and the source of all living. In all versions, Osiris is tricked by Set into lying in a coffin where he is killed and while details vary, all versions hold that Osiris’ body is dismembered and the pieces scattered. Sources also agree that the body is reassembled by Isis, Osiris’s sister/wife, who is aided by her sister, Nephtys. Versions also agree that the phallus is never recovered and that Osiris is “reduced to impotence” (Clark 104); however, in Clark’s words, “Isis was unable to bring her beloved back to life in the full sense...she contrived to revive him sufficiently to be able to conceive a son by him” (106). Again, while details vary, Horus, the son, overthrows Set, and reclaims the kingship, which he shares with Osiris. [6]

As Lock explains, the story of Osiris is less concerned with solving the crime than with the reconstruction and regeneration of the victim, a task that can only be accomplished through communal effort. The pattern underlines *The Conjure-Man Dies*, which is the first in the genre to use multiple detectives, [7] and whose crime

is solved only through collective effort. It is Dart, Archer, and Bubber who reconstruct the servant's identity. And while it is Frimbo who reveals the servant's murder, it is only with Dart's cooperation that he gains the seventy-two hours required by the classical detective formula to solve the crime (Haycraft 1947). Undoubtedly, as a metaphysician, scholar, and king, N'Gana Frimbo is the character who embodies the qualities of Osiris. Certainly Stephen Soitos' description of Frimbo as one of "the most complex characters in black detective fiction" (111) echoes Clark's description of Osiris as "the most complex" god in Egyptian cosmology (97). Indeed, Frimbo's charismatic complexity is noted by the novel's narrator following the first meeting between Archer and Frimbo:

They had talked on diverse and curious topics, but no topic had been so diverse and curious as he extraordinary mind of Frimbo himself. He seemed to grasp the essentials of every discussion and whatever arouse brought forth from him some peculiar and startling view that the physician had never hitherto considered. Dr. Archer had come to observe and found himself the object of the observation. (228-229)

Yet while Soitos recognizes Frimbo's complexity—"modern and ancient, African and American, primitive and sophisticated, mystic and rationalist" (110)—he frames the parameters in terms of binary struggle that narrow sites of binary opposition, thus prompting the declaration of Frimbo "as one of the more brilliant and confused blacks in modern detective fiction" (97). Read in terms of the Osiris archetype, however, Frimbo's "confusion" becomes Osiris' characteristic complexity. And while Frimbo does not, as Bubber notes, do "a Lazarus" (94), I would argue that his failure to do so is less indicative of an ambivalent commitment by Harlem Renaissance writers to Africanity (Lock 44), than characteristic of the myth of Osiris, whose death necessitates collective effort for rebirth. As the novel's ratiocinative detective, Frimbo finds the servant's murder to be "a problem in logic, and perfectly calculable" (124). At the same time, it is Frimbo who introduces the notion of mystery beyond calculation and tells Archer at the conclusion of the interview:

...genuine mystery is incalculable. It is all around us—we look upon it every day and do not wonder at it at all. We are fools, my friend. We grow excited over a ripple, but exhibit no curiosity over the depth of a stream. The profoundest mysteries are those things which we blandly accept without question. See. You are almost white. I am almost black. Find out why, and you will have solved a mystery. (230)

## **Guilt and the Modernist Zeitgeist**

In terms of form, Cawelti's study finds the two most important artistic challenges in the classical detective formula to be the proper balance of reasoning to mystification and the proper balance of inquiry to action. The first, a balance between reasoning to mystification, depends on the author's ability to invent some new type of puzzle while still working within the conventional structure of rational detection; the second, a proper balance between inquiry and action, depends on the author's ability to stage clues and suspects in a way that generates excitement without distracting from investigation and mystification (107-110). My focus here is on the second challenge, the balance between inquiry and action, which Cawelti finds expressive of a physiological tension in the pattern of detective fiction stemming from two dissimilar elements within the formula. As Cawelti explains, on the one hand, the formula "deals extensively with crime,

violence, and death together with the terrible human motives and feelings that lead to such consequences"; on the other, it requires "clarity, order, and logic" in the "ritual conventionality of its patterns" (Cawelti 108).

What links these diametrically opposed elements is the psychological dynamic of guilt, whose presence and whose projection Cawelti and others recognize as fulfilling certain cultural and psychological needs both embodied in the Oedipal myth and structured into the formula of classical detection. [9]Cawelti explains the phenomenon in a passage often quoted:

In the play [Oedipus Rex] detection leads to a revelation of hidden guilts in the life of the protagonist, while in the detective story the inquirer- protagonist and the hidden guilt are conveniently split into two separate characters—the detective and the criminal—thereby enabling us to imagine terrible crimes without also having to recognize our own impulses toward them. (26)

While Cawelti sees the fantasy projection of guilt as "more a matter of psychology than art" (107), he nonetheless acknowledges this presence as central to the detective formula and, in the case of classical detective fiction, equates its importance with that of solution. In terms of literary history, hidden guilt is the component detective fiction shares with Poe's version of Gothic fantasy. As Cawelti notes, the rise of both coincide with the rise of the middle class to social and cultural dominance and reflect what, in the nineteenth-century, the new middle class perceived as threats—the political emergence of the lower classes and "psychological urges towards aggression and sexuality" (102).

Stephen Knight's sociological study of detective fiction identifies guilt as the primary value system operating in the detective fiction, tracing its origins from crime fiction such as *The Newgate Calendar*. Stories here reflect a shame-oriented value system where "values are public and shared, and anyone who acts contrary to them is disgraced, losing status in society as a result....Shame is greatly feared since it is an exclusion from the valued, and ultimately mutually protective group" (Knight 26) [10] Detective fiction, on the other hand, operates in a guilt-oriented system. As Knight explains:

In a guilt-oriented society...the individual created his or her own ideas of rectitude, and misbehaviour is felt personally as guilt even if it is not publicly criticised or even recognised as wrong. Morality is private, and public displays of virtue and honour are seen as hollow shams. (26).

As Knight argues, guilt-oriented crimes require a cunning mind, and it was into this system that detective fiction was introduced. In the formula for classical detection, society represents the stable center of moral order and value, a notion best exemplified by Agatha Christie's perfection of the clue puzzle format dominating the 1930s. According to Knight, many of Christie's characters are presented as "morally weak" and her sub-plots constructed to reveal ways in which such characters are led to breach the moral convention. Moreover, because society represents the center of moral order, the detection process becomes both "method and the end of detection," as well as the "frame within which these characters live and readers inspect their morality" (Knight 117).

Nevertheless, it would be erroneous to apply such a paradigm to *The Conjure-Man Dies*, a point illustrated by Fisher's use of "numbers running" as one of the novel's

sub-plots. Here, what Christie would see as breach in social order (racketeering) or violation of moral convention (gambling) is, in fact, an integral part of the social order. In fact, as David Levering Lewis points out, the numbers lottery was Harlem's "authentically local multimillion-dollar growth industry" (220). The system itself was invented by Casper Holstein, whom Lewis describes as a "Talented Tenth gangster," as "distressed by guns and violence as Countee Cullen" (221). A Fifth Avenue porter at the time, Holstein devised the three-digit system shortly before the First World War, netting nearly a million dollars by 1926 (Lewis 115). One of the few black bankers following the take-over of the lottery system by white gangsters, Holstein's philanthropy in the Harlem community was large and ongoing; and, among other things, his support enabled the \$1,000 contributions to the annual Opportunity awards. Moreover, a self-taught intellectual and outspoken member of the West Indian community, Holstein wrote editorials protesting U.S. foreign policy in the former Danish Virgin Islands (Lewis 130).

*The Conjure-Man Dies* assumes an audience familiar with both the machinations of the lottery system and the irony of its role within the black community. As a result, the structure within which the novel's (black) characters live and (black) readers inspect notions of morality. Like most Harlemites Frimbo plays the numbers. Unlike most Harlemites he wins on a regular basis, a fact that implicates Spider Webb, the street-smart runner who works for Sy Brandon, one of two rival numbers bankers, and who collects Frimbo's bets. Spider expresses surprise at the degree of Dart's knowledge of the activities of rival local bankers and at Dart's explanation that the police use their knowledge of numbers running to monitor crime in the community. Webb, in turn, confides to Dart ways in which number runners cheat their bosses and reveals to readers how the system of policy works:

"You know the percentage—six hundred to one...Hit for ten bucks, you're due six thousand minus the six hundred—five thousand four hundred dollars. Well, even a big banker like Brandon can't stand that—he only collects four grand a week."

"Only," murmured Dart. (137) [11]

It is not my intention here to suggest that Fisher condones numbers racketeering. Indeed, while he avoids the condescension of his peers—or Lewis, for that matter—Fisher's "insider's eye," as Nathan Huggins observes, is neither glamorous nor comic (121). Huggins' point is illustrated by Bubber's promenade down Seventh Avenue, a Harlem ritual that Fisher renders as an urban pastoral. Here, what begins as an urban pastoral ends in an all-too-familiar urban reality when a brawl erupts between two rival numbers runners, leaving one young man dead.

As Knight's study so effectively demonstrates, guilt is the means of (re)inscribing compliance to the moral conventions at the core of the classical detective formula. and Lock's account of its role expands Cawelti's notion of ritual conventionality. Lock's explanation bears repeating in full:

...the crime itself is disruptive enough, but as long as the details of the crime and the identity of its perpetrator remain shrouded in mystery, the whole of society certainly is threatened. When the culprit is unknown, everyone is suspect, so the locus of value can no longer be taken for granted. Mystery—'not knowing'—threatens chaos;



‘knowing’ restores order because it isolates guilt in a single individual. (3)

Stanley Crouch is the isolated individual on which the premise turns in *The Conjure-Man Dies*, and Fisher’s treatment complies with the rule in classical detective fiction that the murderer be the “least likely person” (Cawelti 90). However, it displaces the condition that the criminal be the character “with whom the reader develops no sympathy or identification” (Cawelti 90), forcing an effect unfamiliar to the classical detective story. With one exception, Crouch appears in the novel disguised as Easley Jones, thus fulfilling the “least likely person” requirement. However, in that one appearance, Crouch, the epitome of the newly emerging black businessman, endowed with a laundry list of negative traits attributed to the black middle class by (black) modernist writers of the period, becomes a character with whom the reader comes to identify, even if reluctantly. Following the interrogation, Archer comments to Dart that Crouch’s “bright plumage oft adorns a bird of prey” hides a man who is “hard as a pawnbroker, with an extraordinarily keen awareness of his own possessions. Imagine a man congratulating himself on acquiring an extra month’s rent before his tenant came to grief. (93)

Dart responds to Archer’s moral outrage in a manner not only uncharacteristic of the genre, but in an exchange that produces an effect noticeably at odds with the formula’s moral requirement. Ever the pragmatist, he offers Archer an hypothesis: “[s]uppose a patient of yours died during an operation for which you had already collected the fee. Would you give back the fee—or would you be glad you had got it first?” (93). The question forces Archer to admit that, while he would desire to reimburse the family “with all his heart,” legal circumstances alone would force him to “rush speedily to the bank and deposit the amount to my credit” (93-94). Fisher, however, presses the point beyond self-effacing humor:

“Self- preservation,” grinned Dart.”Well, we can’t blame Crouch for the same thing. He spoke bluntly but maybe the man’s just honest.”

“Maybe everybody is,” said Dr. Archer with a sigh. (94)

My point is not to suggest that guilt is not a moral issue in the black community. What I do mean to suggest is that “guilt” has a significance that is both the same and different for black and white American writers. Moreover, it is a point is of particular consequence in the study of American modernism, wherein academic notions as “primitivism” spawned the trope “The Negro” as the central metaphor to gratify what Nathan Huggins frames as a cultural need for “soft rebellion.” As Huggins explains, changes undermining the traditional nineteenth-century Euro-American moral code began in the early years of the twentieth-century, the traditional Euro-American moral code was jarred by “the popularization of Freudian psychology among young intellectuals and sophisticates” (87). Indeed, Huggins’s discussion of the ways in which white modernists saw Harlem as a means of escaping “guilt- producing norms which threatened to make them emotional cripples” (89) echoes Cawelti’s explanation of the need for the effects of “exciting fear” and “sense of relief” that accompany the objectification and externalization of guilt (90). Both Huggins and Cawelti see tension between confidence and guilt as a moral issue facing the Euro-American middle-class throughout the 1920s: what is different is the way guilt is processed through the detective trajectory.

## (Re)Inscribing Africa in the (Classical) Detective Formula

As Todorov explains, classical detective fiction contains “not one but two stories: the story of the crime and the story of the investigation,” each of which “[i]n their purest forms...have no point in common” (44). The first story, that of the crime, is “the story of an absence [whose] most accurate characteristic is that it cannot be immediately present in the book” (46). And while the first story concerns how the “book came to be written,” it “never confesses its literary nature” (Todorov 45). The second story requires an intermediary who will bring the words and actions from the first story to the second story and is accomplished through the crime’s investigation. In *The Conjure-Man Dies*, the first story is the story of Frimbo and embodies African history in its enigmatic past. Notwithstanding academic debate on the movement’s intention and/or authenticity, the education of African history and heritage was of primary concern to Harlem Renaissance intellectuals. This was particularly true of the younger black intellectuals, children of the “second generation of emancipated men and women, or children from several generations of free people of color” (Davis 7). This was the generation of the New Negro, armed with degrees in higher education and empowered by the success of African American troops in the First World War . Unlike nineteenth-century African American intellectuals, these younger, urban black intellectuals were educated by black professors with access to a network of Pan-African intellectuals openly agitating for participation in world politics, and whose activities included the organization of four Pan-African Congresses between 1919 and 1927. The younger generation of writers and visual artists saw their task as that of reclaiming representations of black culture and of expanding such representations were to include class, as well as race (Gaines 1995), and to incorporate emerging research on Africa conducted by pan-African American scholars. Also unlike the nineteenth-century intellectuals, this is the first generation of African Americans intellectuals with modernist sensibilities. Elmer Imes, for example, husband of Renaissance writer, Nella Larsen, was a graduate of the University of Michigan whose dissertation on infrared spectroscopy was reprinted in a scholarly journal on astrophysics in 1919 (Davis 119). Fisher, himself, was a physician and research biologist, as well as a writer and musician.

However, for Lock, Fisher’s choice to make Dr. Archer the novel’s center sacrifices the novel’s “Africanity.” Rather, Lock would have Fisher give Frimbo “his own book” and sees the choice of Archer as the novel’s “mouthpiece” as one which allows the forces of “rationalism and Western discourse to carry the day” (46). Lock, as does Todorov, reads the first book of the detective story as literary; and, as does Soitos, reads “investigation” as indicative of “the important of ancestralism to the modern African American Renaissance” (Soitos 116). However, in light of Fisher’s academic background and position as a black modernist, I would suggest that the first book of *The Conjure-Man Dies* ignores the literary altogether, much the same way that the Western literary has ignored African orature. [12] I would further suggest that Fisher does give Frimbo his own “book,” in that it is through Frimbo’s oral stories that Africa—the absent world of the first story is made present and recognizable in the world of the second. What is unique about Fisher’s treatment—and what has been overlooked in the face of images spawned by the white modernist cult of primitivism, spawned by premise itself [13] —is that Fisher is the only creative writer of the period to infuse newly emerging pan-African scholarship into black modernist literature. As a result, if the first book of classical detection “ignores its literary nature,” the first book of Fisher’s self-termed “experiment with technique” (Tignor 17), ignores the literary altogether to (re)inscribe African oral tradition.

As Lock argues, in Afrocentric detective story, Osiris replaces Oedipus as the mythological model. As I argue here, the shift in mythological models alters the nature of the psychological tension fundamental to the detective formula, replacing guilt with indeterminacy to maintain the proper balance between reasoning and mystification on which the formula turns. As such the effect should be available to formal analysis, discernable to the reader and evident in the text. I use "effect" here defined by Austin Wright in *The Formal Principle in the Novel*:

The effect is really the 'implied effect.' Not that real emotions in real readers are not legitimate—nevertheless, they are not the effect but only clues to it, and critics must learn to what extent they can depend on such clues. The implied effect is the concept that enables real readers to bridge the gap between their own responses and those of others, not by the lowest common denominator but by just the opposite: for the implied audience may well be more perceptive, more responsive, more capable of attention, than any individual member is likely to be" (132).

As I argue, the externalization of guilt is replaced by the internalization of indeterminacy. As evidence of effect as it applies to Dr. Wright's notion implied effect on an implied audience, I offer Lock's sense of "uneasy ambiguity" (47) at the conclusion of *The Conjure-Man Dies* and Stanley Ellin's observation that "[o]ne is drawn through the book by its story, but emerges at last with much more than that story in mind" (Introduction). Their responses—articulated nearly twenty years apart and under disparate circumstances—offer a response broader than any one individual. Moreover, both responses are in keeping with Cawelti's definition of literature, and as critic and author, respectively, one may presuppose capability in their attention. However, as Wright points out, such felt responses are clues to the effect and literary critics must utilize such clues to find evidence in the text.

### **(Re)Inscription and Formal Principle**

Cawelti sees the patterns of action in classical detective fiction occurring in six main phases: introduction of the detective, crime and clues, investigation, announcement of the solution, explanation of the solution, and denouement (Cawelti 81-82). The phases themselves are often collapsed; nor do they necessarily occur in sequence: nevertheless, in Cawelti's opinion, it would be "difficult to conceive of a classical [detective] story without them" (82). If, as Gates and others argue, the black interpretative process is itself defined by indeterminacy in that the black text is a "chain of signifiers...which must be interpreted through a process...[that is] both open-ended and repeatable" (Gates 40), then Fisher's use of Cawelti's six phases should reveal specific sites at which indeterminacy replaces guilt in the detective formula.

According to Cawelti's taxonomy, the victim, introduced in the first phase of action, must be the character of least importance in order not to draw attention away from the detective, who is also introduced in this phase. True to the formula, the murdered man *The Conjure-Man Dies* is actually Frimbo's servant, enabling Fisher to comply with the convention, but it is as victim that Frimbo incites interest. As the investigation progresses, curiosity increases: the search of Frimbo's apartment reveals, among other things, a laboratory with specimens of "male sex glands," a diploma from Harvard, and a room with enough electrical power to operate an X-ray machine. Archer is convinced that Frimbo "was no ordinary fakir" (26), a point that Fisher reiterates by weaving proof of Frimbo's

efficacy as a metaphysician into the novel's subplots. In one instance, Dart himself is familiar with the case of a young man who has miraculously survived a knife wound to the head. What Dart learns during the investigation is that the boy's mother had recently applied to Frimbo to protect her son: "Anybody else'd 'a' been killed on the spot," Aramintha Snead tells Dart. "But not Lem. Lem was under Frimbo's spell. That's what saved him" (82). Certainly Frimbo's prediction that Jinx Jenkins will have his needs taken care of sooner than he thinks comes to pass; and Jenkins' subsequent arrest for Frimbo's murder provides the abundance of food and shelter Frimbo has predicted. Moreover, as predicted, Jinx is only relieved when this "physical security" is withdrawn and uncertainty has returned.

Fisher splits the third phase, investigation, into two lines of inquiry—the false line of inquiry followed by Archer and Dart, who believe Frimbo to have killed his assistant; and the line of inquiry pursued by Frimbo, which leads to the killer's apprehension. In the false line of inquiry, the phases four and five—announcement of the solution, explanation of the solution—result in Dart's announcement Frimbo as the murderer and offers as proof, his burning of the servant's body, witnessed by Bubber. It is this line of inquiry that Fisher uses as the vehicle for the first book in its information of African social structure: "He was one of my clan and entitled to use the name, Frimbo. His distinguishing name, however—what you would call his Christian name, had he not been a heathen and a savage—was N'Ogo" (304). The explanation of the false solution introduces moral conventions characteristic of the Osiris myth, and the justification for the body's disposal indicative of collective effort in the Osiris archetype. The servant's body needed to be "purged of the disgrace" at dying at the hands of one outside his clan in a ritual that needed to be performed before sunset of the third day following death, thus the insertion of larger meaning into the use of seventy- two hours before apprehending the murderer. Frimbo's explanation of the ritual and its purpose is recounted with a "total lack of embarrassment, his dignity, his utter composure, could not fail to produce effect" (304-305). The tone of the description is not accidental and underscores one of the primary concerns of Renaissance intellectuals such as W.E.B. DuBois, whose articles and editorials on African history and pan-African politics were a regular feature in *The Crisis* in the years following the WWI.

The manipulation of the false line of inquiry leads to site of critical inquiry, where traditional notions of "clarity, logic and order" on which the classical detective formula is constructed meet in what Gates would identify as "a bipolar moment of figuration within a system of differences" (40). Impressed by Frimbo's explanation of the ritual required by the servant's death, Dart begins to consider Frimbo's innocence. However, the sense of relief that should follow the proven innocence of a sympathetic character is thwarted by Frimbo's indifferent response: "It is not of the slightest importance to me Mr. Dart whether or not you or the authorities you represent believe me or not. My concern is not for my own protection but for the discharge of my obligations as king" (305). The statement leaves the usually-pithy Dart momentarily silent, which Fisher utilizes to conduct what Bahktinian thought would identify as internalized dialogue, wherein the "point" of genre is interrogated by its own ratiocinative detective. [14]The narration underscores the statement's impact: "This was an attitude which Dart had never encountered. The complete and convincing unimportance to Frimbo of what was paramount to the detective left the latter for the moment without resource. He was silent, considering." (306). The next sentence continues the sense of time lapsed: "finally" Dart speaks again, asking questions of Frimbo that allow Fisher to use the explanation phase of the first line of inquiry with information on African social systems.

In the second line of inquiry, that of Frimbo's pursuit of the killer, the announcement and explanation of the solution (fourth and fifth phases) are collapsed, occurring simultaneously when Stanley Crouch, disguised as Easley Jones, shoots Frimbo for having an affair with his wife. Soitos's analysis finds the motive for Frimbo's death banal compared to the book's "more developed and ambitious themes":

Frimbo, it turns out, has committed that most common of sins—sleeping with another man's wife. The jealousy motive is hackneyed and not well developed. Martha Crouch's love for Frimbo seems contrived, and Frimbo's manifest disregard for women makes his part in this love affair less than sympathetic. (122).

Unquestionably, Fisher follows a pattern familiar to classical detective fiction. Indeed, as George Grella points out, in classical detective fiction, "[v]iolations of accepted morality, particularly adultery, are capital crimes" (Grella 42). At the same, Cawelti counters that, when exceptions do occur and sympathetic characters are guilty, the detective must carefully establish that their crime was "justified and that they are not guilty in a moral sense" (90). Nor does Frimbo's guilt in the moral sense fail to go unnoticed, as demonstrated by Soitos's critical observation. Therefore, while the choice of adultery is common to the detective plot, it violates the mandate that "pains be taken to make the victim...an exceptionally murderable man" (Grella 41). Both lines of inquiry converge in the denouement, or sixth phase, which, according to Cawelti's study, is "more concerned with the isolation and specification of guilt than with the punishment of the criminal" (91). Yet, while Fisher's denouement complies with the convention of providing the "how and "why" of the murder, it concludes with a sympathy for both the victim and murderer:

"Smart guy that Frimbo," Bubber observed. AY'know, I wouldn't mind bein' kind o' crazy if it made me that smart."

"That Crouch wasn't no dumbbell" (314-15).

Furthermore, while the "guilty party" is isolated, into the prerequisite single individual, the murderer and his crime are framed, not by guilt, but indeterminacy, since, for Bubber and Jinx, Crouch's crime is logical, pragmatic in its purpose, and successful in its goal:

"The grave-digger," Jinx muttered. "He sho' meant to dig me in, didn't he?"

"If it hadn't been you, 'twould 'a' been somebody else. He jes' didn't mean to lose his wife and his life both. Couldn't blame him for that. Jes' ordinary common sense." (316)

According to Cawelti, Poe constructed the detective formula around four primary units: the detective, the criminal, the victim, and those characters "threatened by the crime but incapable of solving it." Among these four units, Cawelti points out, "[d]oing the victim right" is a particular challenge in classical detective formula in that it requires a character whose interest must not overshadow the detective but, at the same time, avoid an "indifference that would keep the reader from caring about the investigation" (91). Poe developed two means of effecting this balance interest and indifference—by making the victims obscure ("The Murders in the Rue Morgue"), and by keeping a victim of importance "almost entirely out of the

story" ("The Purloined Letter"). As Cawelti explains, "In both instances Poe succeeded in keeping the reader from being too deeply involved in the victim's fate while at the same time providing ample justification and suspense for the detective's inquiry" (92). While, Cawelti continues, detective writers have tended to follow this practice, Fisher does not. Indeed, Fisher's denouement is less concerned with "the isolation and specification of guilt" than in becoming a focus of interest in its own right, for the denouement of *The Conjure-Man Dies* not only fails to produce the "clarity, logic and order" expected of the formula, it secures indeterminacy as the novel's overall effect.

Cawelti's fifth phase is significant in terms of effect and formal principle. As Cawelti explains, it is here that formula enables the reader to participate in what Northrup Frye terms a "ritual drama," wherein a "wavering finger of social condemnation passes over a group of 'suspects' and finally settles on one" (Frye qtd. in Cawelti 106). According to Cawelti, it is this ritual that initiates the psychological effect fundamental to the formula—the externalization of the reader's guilt. As Cawelti explains, to "serve the basic psychological function of the classic formula," the detective story must not only be a mystery, it must also "mystify in a particular way" (Cawelti 107). The investigation must bring characters under suspicion with whom readers must be able to truly suspect at the same time they wish to be proved not guilty in order to effect the sense of relief that accompanies the ritual of naming. Without a doubt, Frimbo is the character with whom readers are encouraged to sympathize in *The Conjure-Man Dies*, and it is certainly Frimbo who mystifies in Cawelti's "particular way." Yet the "sense of relief" so vital to the classical detection formula is short-lived, eradicated almost immediately by Frimbo's death.

In fact, Frimbo's death is secondary to the effect it provokes—because he is killed in the novel's final pages, he apprehends his own murderer and thus solves the crime. As readers, we are mystified in Cawelti's particular way, but not characteristic to the Eurocentric detective formula. On the other hand, the mystification occurs because Frimbo is the character who most identifies with Osiris, and it is only through death that one can "become an Osiris" (Clark 161). As Clark identifies, the Osiris myth turns on how death is transformed into life and death signals the evolution of "a pilgrim" to an Osiris. Moreover, it is only by death that one can claim the right to identify with Osiris, since to become one with Osiris is to become one with the cosmic cycles of death and rebirth (Clark 97). As important, it is with Frimbo's death that *The Conjure-Man Dies* demonstrates characteristics identifiable to Yorba and Fon cosmology, wherein closure "does not exist until one's death, when one's *ori* is, at last, retrieved or recalled, just as the living subject has been recalled to the ancestors" (Gates 35).

The influence of the West African Yoruba and Dahomey civilizations on African American culture and aesthetics is firmly established in the academy (Thompson 1983, Blier 1995). Equally established is the role of indeterminacy in the cosmology of these civilizations and of their integral relation to African American culture. Of significance here is Henry Louis Gates' *The Signifyin(g) Monkey* (1986), which, among other things, examines the connection between linguistic systems of the Yorba and Dahomey as they relate to the notion of indeterminacy as a formal principle in African American literature, a notion quite apart from Western notions of indeterminacy as "open-ended." Certainly, no discussion of these linguistic systems could—or should—be considered separate from the cosmology and psychology of these systems; and such a discussion is certainly beyond the scope of this paper. However, it is important to note that within this

complex system lies what I see as an important key to understanding difference in reference to the displacement of guilt by indeterminacy as the psychological tension balancing the detective formula. According to Gates, "text" is comprised of the "dynamic and indeterminate relationship between truth...and understanding," while "meaning" "can be both multiple and indeterminate, as underscored by the densely ambitious and figurative language of which the entire system consists" (25). It is important to note, however, that, here, indeterminacy is not open-ended in the Western sense, but rather in the sense that "while the total possible number of *ese* [readings] that could be uttered by the priest is a fixed number (over 150,000), no propitiate could possibly sit through a divination session long enough to hear these chanted" (Gates 26).

This type of "structured" open-endedness characterizes multicultural detective fiction, detective fiction in which the detective is "other" than traditional, white male. [15] And, as in the case of *The Conjure-Man Dies*, the works conclude, not with unresolved texts, as much as texts that demand something more from their readers. Indeed, Lock's "uneasy ambiguity" and Ellin's sense of "more than the story in mind" voice a response not characteristic of the genre. Interestingly, such responses are more in keeping with Cawelti's definition of literature, here distinguished by conclusions to complex to be understood from a single unified point of view" (89). Moreover, the ritual initiating the psychological function fundamental to the classic formula still occurs; however, it is no longer that produced by the catharsis of guilt. One might say that in multicultural detective fiction, Frye's wavering finger of social condemnation singles out the reader, who must continue the dialogic beyond the text itself. Once entertained, the reader of multicultural detective fiction— a genre, which I argue begins with Fisher— cannot "escape." Within this genre, the reader's sense of relief is replaced by a sense of responsibility, a sense that "something" more is required, a mystery the reader is left to shape and solve. [16]



## Endnotes:

1. Worth noting is that the results of Fisher's experiment with the detective formula initiate formal innovations that not only compare with, but precede, those found in works by Agatha Christie, Dorothy Sayers, and George Simenone, the three authors John Cawelti credits with expanding the artistic possibilities of the classical detective formula. Like *Nine Tailors* (1934), considered by Cawelti to be Dorothy L. Sayer's best work, *The Conjure-Man Dies* interweaves "alternative narrative interests in character, setting, and thematic significance" into the formula (120). Like Agatha Christie's *An Overdose of Death* (1940), Fisher misleads the reader in five of the six ways Cawelti catalogues as strategies innovated by Christie: deceit as to victim, motive, means, time, and, in light of Frimbo's "resurrection," questions of whether or not a crime has been committed (114); and like George Simenon, Fisher requires his readers to "make complex inferences about the character of the suspects," as well as the effect on environment on their actions (Cawelti 128).
2. Fisher's decision to represent John Archer as a light-skinned, pedantic physician has contributed to interesting mis-readings, such as his character as white (Bailey, *Out of the Woodpile*) and as one whose actions are meant to be read as white because of skin color (Lock, *Mis-Taken Identity*),
3. The notable exception here is Stephen Soitos, who notes that "Fisher executes a startling revision of standard detective personas by introducing four black detectives into the novel" (93).
4. Bubber and his partner, Jinx Jenkins, appear first in *The Walls of Jericho* (1928), where they function as a Harlesemese/Greek chorus.

5. See Bailey, *Out of the Woodpile: Black Characters in Crime and Detective Fiction*, for the range of novel's reviews.

6. As Clark explains, the kingship in Egypt "consisted of a duality...based on a relationship between the living and the dead" (107). The power of the living king was derived from all of the ancestors, but from the father in particular, which then made the father divine. The father in the tomb was the source of a power the Egyptians called *Ka* and Osiris, the dead king, was "the dweller in *Ka hotep*—the *Ka* at rest." (107). Only if the son carried out the required rites could the father "achieve beatification and...function as a spirit," activating *Ka* and "the powers of life and growth" (Clark 107).

7. John Cawelti notes that *The Moonstone* by Wilkie Collins exhibits characteristics of detective fiction and is told from a multiple perspective, but places the novel itself "at some point on the line of development between the nineteenth-century novel of sensation and the twentieth-century classical detective story" (135).

8. See Gosselin, "The World Would Do Better To Ask 'Why is Frimbo Sherlock Holmes?'"

9. For a particularly in-depth analysis of guilt and the detective pattern in the traditional Western aesthetic, see David Grosvogel, *Mystery and Its Fiction: From Oedipus to Agatha Christie*.

10. Knight's discussion goes on to include William Godwin's *The Adventures of Caleb Williams*, published in 1794, and *Les Memoirs de Vidocq*, published in 1811. In Knight's analysis, while Godwin finds the theory of an organic society embodied in *The Newgate Calendar* stories to be inadequate, his novel offers no alternative system. Moreover, Knight attributes the "overall sense of gloom" characterizing the novel to Godwin's suspicion of the absolute value of individual intelligence. Knight suggests that if Goodwin offers any solution, it will be found in a "small, mutually honest and affectionate society" where, unlike that presented in *The Newgate Calendar*, "the individual is subsumed, supported and protected" (22). *The Memoirs of Vidocq*, an autobiography of an ex-criminal turned police informer, introduces the first professional detective in literature. Here, criminals are portrayed, not as aberrant members of society, but as hostile and powerful enemies. While Vidocq has moments of brilliance, his success is the result of persistent police work. For Knight, Vidocq is a hero who functions "for and through the people" as opposed to methods distinguished by isolation or alienated intelligence (34).

11. The passage exemplifies a shift in Fisher's intended audience: Fisher's first novel, *The Walls of Jericho* included an eleven-page glossary of Harlesemese for "uninitiated."

12. See Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word.* London: Methuen. 1982.

13. That the term "primitivism" itself is still of use in Renaissance and Modernist scholarship highlights issues of concern. Critical arguments which seek to distinguish "exploited primitivism from "true primitivism," fail to grasp a still recurring axis between black/white modernists and recall a warning from Wole Soyika that to continue to evaluate racial productions from some points of view in Western asethetics is dangerous to one's self esteem. See Henry Louis Gates, "Authority, (White) Power, and the (Black) Critic: It's All Greek to Me."

14. I discuss the potential of Bakhtin's theory of novelistic discourse to arguments for black American Modernism in "Harlem Heteroglossia: The Voice of Nobody's "Other."

15. See *Multicultural Detective Fiction: Murder from the "Other" Side* for discussions of ways in which multicultural detective fiction comprises a distinct detective genre.

16. This work is dedicated to Austin M. Wright.

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