Dreams for Dead Bodies

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CHAPTER 5

Prescription

Homicide?

No ordinary physician, Rudolph Fisher earned a medical degree from Howard University in 1924 and completed postgraduate research at Columbia University. A clergyman’s son who received B.A. and M.A. degrees from Brown University, he toured the eastern seaboard accompanying Paul Robeson on the piano to raise funds for college. He was a roentgenologist who once held private practice on Long Island but had, since the onset of the Great Depression, worked as an X-ray technician at Harlem Hospital; he would die in 1934 at the age of thirty-seven from a stomach disorder caused by exposure to his own equipment. He was also a moderately acclaimed writer of the Harlem Renaissance who palled around with the likes of Alain Locke, and supposedly intimidated Langston Hughes with his sharp wit. Still, only a few documents in the Rudolph Fisher Papers at the John Hay Library at Brown University are written entirely in the author’s hand. In addition to drafts of a few stories (“The Lindy Hop” and “Skeeter”), scattered notes, and the beginnings of a clearly polemical essay titled “White Writers of Current Black Fiction,” there is a sheet of paper titled only “The New Negro.” On this page, Fisher scrawled a free-form “medical” evaluation of a body of work that he dubbed “The novel of the life of the ‘new negro.’”

In his brief report, Fisher delineates the peculiarities of “Negro Life as Literary Material” according to three classes of descriptive symptoms of the “Negro himself.” He begins with a list of books that treat the subject of the negro “Physically,” an inventory that contains Jessie Fauset’s Plum Bum, Nella Larsen’s Passing, and Wallace Thurman’s The Blacker the Berry, plus many more. The next column lists books that portray the negro “Spiritually”: Langston Hughes’s Not Without Laughter, DuBose Heyward’s Porgy, Fauset’s The Chinaberry Tree, and so on. Finally there is his “Situation in
America,” a catalog comprising W. E. B. DuBois’s *Dark Princess*, George Schuyler’s *Black No More*, Carl Van Vechten’s *Nigger Heaven*, and Fisher’s own *The Walls of Jericho*, among others. Fisher’s diagnosis comes down to the “estimation of the condition of this body of literature,” likely a comment on the perceived aesthetic “failure” of the “Negro Renaissance” of the 1920s by the early 1930s (Hutchinson 8). But the doctor advises a regimen, beginning with “less of the poor little yaller gal, let’s have a comedy. More of conflicts about internal diversity—this—hidden in varieties of hair, huckleberry to patent leather, and in degrees of pigmentation—chestnut, seal skin, brown . . . cream, light yellow, and pink.” Fisher’s literary prescription also includes additional emphasis on “resiliency” and calls for less stress on “situation,” proposing a purposeful turn to what he calls “pigmentation of the brain, not skins.” And with an ultimate, sweeping flourish, an arrow points to the title of Fisher’s second and last book, a work of detective fiction titled *The Conjure-Man Dies: A Mystery Tale of Dark Harlem* (1932).

Does this grand gesture indicate that Fisher intended to treat some infirmity in a body of literary productions on the “The New Negro” with a text about the murder of one of its members? *The Conjure-Man Dies* is a “locked-room” (or rather “waiting-room”) puzzle that follows police detective Perry Dart and the physician John Archer in their joint efforts to finger the client who murdered the enigmatic African soothsayer N’Gana Frimbo—and their perplexing discovery, halfway through the book, that Frimbo staged his own death in anticipation of the assassin’s arrival. To date, critics have positioned Fisher’s murder mystery as primarily a rejoinder to a white-authored tradition of detective fiction writing. Stephen Soitos treats *The Conjure-Man Dies* as an instance of black “blues” detection whose distinct lineage can be traced to Pauline Hopkins’s serialized *Hagar’s Daughter: A Story of Southern Caste Prejudice* and J. E. Bruce’s *Black Sleuth*. According to Soitos, we can differentiate these works from white-authored detective fictions based on their use of distinctly “black” detective themes, including “altered detective personas, double-conscious detection, black vernaculars, and hoodoo” (93). Along these lines, Fisher’s version of the whodunit incorporates aspects of urban African American culture into the classical detective formula to renovate the genre, and even implies that a “meld of Afro-centric and Euro-American views might be possible” in the person of its conjure-man—a possibility that is, however, dashed by N’Gana Frimbo’s actual assassination at the end of the book (116). Adrienne Gosselin offers the more provocative claim that the “Dusky Sherlock Holmes” in Fisher’s text is neither Perry Dart, the Harlem
Police detective, nor his “Doctor Watson” John Archer, but the eponymous N’Gana Frimbo, whose soothsaying talents evoke the ratiocinative flair Arthur Conan Doyle assigns to Sherlock Holmes in his early novellas (610). Consequently, Frimbo’s (second and real) death in the final pages of the text represents, among other things, Fisher’s attempt to obliterate the kind of thinking pioneered by Sherlock Holmes as well as that sleuth’s iconic status, “to reject the monolithic voice of Eurocentric classical detection by destroying the genre’s most recognizable symbol” (617).

These interpretations of The Conjure-Man Dies are predicated upon the text’s supposed antagonism with a genre whose most celebrated works exalt the deductive prowess of white male detectives. Additionally, they imply that Fisher appreciated his status as a generic interloper and took detective fiction as the central object of his revisionary ambitions, helping to pioneer an alternate, oppositional tradition of black-authored detection texts. By contrast, this chapterforegrounds Fisher’s symbiotic engagement with the mechanisms of detection fiction, proposing that the genre supplied an expedient wheel for spinning the literary material of Negro life. Unlike the works examined in other chapters of this study, The Conjure-Man Dies can be situated simultaneously at the center and the margins of the detective genre, as it synthesizes concerns about interracial sociability typically explored on the genre’s peripheries while consolidating detective fiction’s repertoire of generic elements in an exemplary “genre text.”

This chapter argues that The Conjure-Man Dies is a work of black modernism whose exploration of interracial sociability takes place through its negotiation and use of a preexisting form. Not only does the text avail itself of detection’s devices to negotiate the racialized regulation of bodies and economies, the author’s deliberate engagement with its narrative-analytical tools (his detection “prescription”) affirms the racial heterogeneity of the genre. Fisher exploits the sociopolitical subtexts of the “locked room” puzzle to generate a work of literary sociology that, in accordance with his recommendations for Negro literature, foregrounds the varieties of “blackness” in Depression-era Harlem, a setting the author once described as a “modern metropolis turned black” (City of Refuge 330). Moreover, while Fisher uses the rites of integration rooted in classical detective fiction to assemble a community of Harlemites, The Conjure-Man Dies remains highly conscious of that community’s relationship to white-dominated institutions. Rather than attempting to annihilate a “monolithic” voice of white-authored detective fiction, Fisher’s work is in conversation with contemporary detective fic-
tions (as well other forms of popular culture) fixated on “foreign” persons and “exotic” accents. *The Conjure-Man Dies* certainly punctures or at least pokes fun at narrative “prejudice”—a faulty cultural logic that exists at the level of genre—as well as at any popular primitivism that would enlist Africa as source of “savage” ancestry or a place of primordial wholeness. But Fisher’s classical detective novel doubles as a sociology of race and labor, confronting the effects of the Great Migration, efforts at urban uplift, and questions of economic empowerment for diverse black constituencies. His attempt to depict a “pigmentation of the brain, not skins” generates a complex account of black experience, but also foreshadows the author’s shift toward hard-boiled detective fiction in his final published work, “John Archer’s Nose.”

**A MODERN METROPOLIS TURNED BLACK**

“You’re an American, of course?”

“I is now. But I originally come from Savannah, Georgia.”

*Rudolph Fisher, The Conjure-Man Dies*

Fisher’s ideas about black experience are partially elucidated by Norman Klein’s July 27, 1932, article for the *New York Evening Post* whose headline, “Harlem Doctor Produces Dusky Sherlock Holmes,” is accompanied by the somewhat lurid subtitle: “‘I Was Once a White Man,’ Author Explains, ‘but My Brain Pigmentation Changed’—His Doctor Watson is Dark and Clever.” The “dusky” sleuth Klein refers to is one of the protagonists of Fisher’s *The Conjure-Man Dies: A Mystery Tale of Dark Harlem*, police detective Perry Dart. In that same interview with the *New York Evening Post*, Fisher explains that police detective Dart was “drawn from a real Negro policeman. One night two men broke into my office on Seventh Avenue at 138th Street. That is how I met Detective Boyden of the 135th Street precinct station.” In *The Conjure-Man Dies*, however, the “real Negro policeman” partners with an amateur investigator to solve the case: Dr. John Archer, a Harlem physician who, unsurprisingly, bears close resemblance to Dr. Fisher. The small matter of “brain pigmentation,” however, is Fisher’s invention alone. “When I became a physician and went back to practice in Harlem,” the writer explains to Klein, “I acquired pigmentation. I change color in Harlem. Yes, a pigmentation of the brain. I saw black. I thought black. I have been through a most thrilling experience.”
But how does this mental inclination translate into Fisher’s bizarre tale of the murder of N’Gana Frimbo, the Harvard-educated king in absentia of the (invented) African nation of Buwongo, who makes a living as a sort of consulting psychic and soothsayer out of his Harlem brownstone? An appreciative review in *Time* counts “3 ½ corpses, 2 investigators, 7 suspects, 2 funny persons, 1 error by investigators, 2 errors by culprits” in the book, but points out that instead of supplying the requisite “new trick,” Fisher’s work of detective fiction relies on a “new combination of old ones” to keep readers on their toes. These are “reanimation” (the sudden appearance of Frimbo, alive and well, halfway through the investigation) and the use of “double dual identity” that leads to the revelation that not one but multiple characters have disguised themselves over the course of the fiction. If it is so easily appraised according to the conventions of so-called white-authored detective fiction, what claim has this “Mystery Tale of Dark Harlem” to a patently black perspective, to the “pigmentation of the brain” Fisher describes?

Fisher’s novel shows its color precisely by borrowing the blueprints of the genre. Certainly *The Conjure-Man Dies* entails recognizable revisions of the puzzle mystery’s conventions: Soitos points out that Fisher substitutes the Harlem “cityscape” for a country estate, for instance, and swaps the English manor for a New York City brownstone (Soitos 107, 101). But this transformation isn’t a revision of a blueprint so much as a well-trodden Americanization; from Anna Katherine Green’s *The Leavenworth Case* (1878) to S. S. Van Dine’s *The Benson Murder Case* (1926), the Manhattan residence had many times supplied a venue for homicide. Nevertheless, the clue-puzzle formula of classical detective fiction formula actually facilitates one of Fisher’s strongest aspirations as an author: to present Harlem as a site of internal diversity. In “At Home in Harlem,” the *New York Herald* 1928 review of Fisher’s first book, *The Walls of Jericho*, Eric Walrond stresses that Fisher’s work strives to presents Harlem in all its fiscal and social heterogeneity. Walrond argues that while novels of the 1920s quite often border on formlessness and are perhaps best (or only) gauged by a “standard of bulk,” in Fisher’s work “the seeming lack of form does not signify meretriciousness of purpose,” since *The Walls of Jericho* somehow succeeds at portraying no less than three tiers of Harlem society, and so “achieves a feat which has been the Waterloo of most Negro fiction writers.” Whereas *The Walls of Jericho* is characterized by abrupt shifts between Harlem’s social strata, with *The Conjure-Man Dies* Fisher’s varied cast is tied together by shared circumstance: the seven suspects and their circles of close associates and adversar-
ies, the team of policemen and their professional consultants are all involved in the investigation of an individual’s death. By virtue of their presence in Frimbo’s waiting room, seven members of the all-black cast might become immediate objects of interest. The opportunity to depict such a large cast of characters is also a challenge, however. As John Cawelti points out, “If the characters [in the puzzle mystery] are not interesting enough to involve us in their fates, the mystery structure will seem like a sterile and desiccated skeleton and to that extent fail to sustain our involvement” (Adventure 110). But Fisher rises to the challenge, using the puzzle mystery as impetus to chronicle the social experiences of diverse black Americans in Harlem. Not only does his adherence to the genre’s conventions enable Fisher to pose his varied, all-black cast under an equal spotlight, the fact that each of his characters is conscripted to play a role in a murder investigation calls attention to the reality that community membership is contingent upon—indeed, constituted by—a particular relationship to the state and its laws.

In one of his first published short stories, “The City of Refuge” (1925), Fisher problematizes the rapport between the individual and Harlem law enforcement. This story features King Solomon Gillis, a southern expatriate who, having escaped the “country” of his birth—and very likely a lynching, for he has shot a white man—arrives in New York City still wet behind the ears. While not serendipitous, Fisher writes, the shooting may be said to have “catalyzed whatever sluggish mental reaction had been already directing King Solomon’s fortunes toward Harlem,” where the “land of plenty” he had oft aspired to could double as the “city of refuge” (City of Refuge 36). Of the many marvels Gillis stumbles upon in the city, one stands out once he arrives: its “Cullud policemans!” whose presence directing traffic in the streets of Harlem is “too great to believe simply by seeing” and leaves Gillis awe-struck with disbelief; “Black might be white, but it couldn’t be that white!” (36). “Even got cullud policemans—even got cullud” becomes the soothing lullaby and strange refrain that Gillis croons to himself (36). He moons over this miracle of the metropolis, explaining to his new acquaintance Mouse Uggam, “Dass all I want to be, a policeman, so I kin police all the white folks right plumb in jail” (41). But the street-smart Uggam has other plans for King Solomon Gillis; he ropes guileless Gillis, whom he regards as “a baby jess in from the land o’cotton and so dumb he thinks ante bellum’s an old woman,” into a drug-distribution scheme. The countrified King Solomon is easy prey, and Uggam is not so upright he won’t stoop to framing his innocent drug-runner. Uggam plants some of his stock of “valuable French
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medicine” on Gillis’s person and hands him over to the police (37, 41). No stranger to the arm of the law, the burly Gillis knocks two white officers flat, then faces a third, black policeman, and is again starstruck: “Very slowly King Solomon’s arms relaxed very slowly he stood erect, and the grin that came over his features had something exultant about it” (47).

Fisher’s story, which ends with Gillis hauled away by the cops, still muttering his usual tribute to the “cullud policeman,” is characterized by the light but penetrating satire that is typical of author’s work. On the one hand, the “cullud policeman” King Solomon reveres unquestionably overhauls the order of things he had come to expect down south. He is a great symbol of a (partially) integrated and (somewhat) equitable system of law enforcement and a source of real pride and identification in Harlem. And yet King Solomon Gillis is mollified by his own peculiar incantation, as if he had submitted to a bit of self-subterfuge, made mesmerized and biddable by a man whose mission, in spite the face of things, is to incarcerate him for a crime he has not knowingly or intentionally committed. Fisher’s tongue-in-cheek illustration of racial pride paradoxically figures urban assimilation as reflexive incarceration, without entirely dismissing the real meaningfulness of having African American representatives among New York City’s law enforcement officers. In this way, Fisher’s depictions of the residents of Harlem are neither sycophantic nor condescending, but laced with an irony that marvels with raised eyebrows. His writing tenders social critique without refuting the significance of a cultural imaginary as a form of psychic support. As a result, he achieves a satirical social realism that both delineates the conditions of community and defamiliarizes those conditions.

In The Walls of Jericho, too, Fisher approaches the boundaries of the “black metropolis” from an unlikely direction. He writes of a Fifth Avenue that abandons its “aristocracy” uptown, where, as it approaches Harlem, “You can see the Avenue change expression—blankness, horror, conviction” (4). He perceives its dismay at suddenly finding itself in “the dark kingdom’s backwoods” crammed with “bargain-stores, babble, and kids, dinginess, odors, thick speech” (4, 3). If only, Fisher laments, it had pursued an alternate route!—escaped these horrors by making its way to the “Seventh Avenue of a Sunday afternoon,” or “The Hill”: the “so-called dickty sections” inhabited by the well-to-do black bourgeoisie. What are we to make of this city street’s shame of association with its second self, or that the thoroughfare, a horrified Harlem gatecrasher, pits Patmore’s Pool Parlor against Strivers’ Row? Is Fisher’s Fifth Avenue an interloper incarnate, like those
“ofays” to whom, as Fisher wrote in his essay on the “Negro Metropolis,” “Harlem falsely appears to be a curious carnival, dancing away its nights and sleeping away its days” (City of Refuge 330)? Does this crosstown passage turn up “dickty” disdain for Harlem’s working-class “rats”? Or perhaps its address is the “backwoods”: a sendup of “high-toned” ambitions to be “white” and well-heeled. The precise location of the narrative voice remains strange; its subject is indefinite. More baffling still is the book’s subplot about the well-to-do, light-skinned lawyer Fred Merrit, who decides single-handedly to racially redistrict that “snob of a street” Court Avenue, and is firebombed for his troubles. But the firebug is not Court Avenue’s high-strung spinster Alma Cramp, who longs to “uplift” her neighbor. Instead, it is Henry Patmore, who has long borne a grudge against the lawyer. Even Merrit is impressed by this plot twist: “Can you imagine it? A Negro—using white prejudice to cover what he wanted to do—putting the blame in the most likely spot—almost getting away with it, too—Can you beat that?” (279–80). In its opening sally and in certain contortions of its story line, The Walls of Jericho traverses narrative clichés to underscore a cacophony of conflict. Fisher offers an intricate if tendentious image of inter- and intraracial discord that vitalizes a Harlem whose residents are all too conversant (and perhaps disenchanted) with “respectable” plotting.

However, Fisher also offers us a more jovial image of Harlem that brings the denizens of Patmore’s Pool Parlor into peaceful contact with the black middle classes. The “colony” convenes at the General Improvement Association’s Annual Costume Ball: “This is the one occasion in Harlem when everybody is present and nobody minds,” writes Fisher, and, “Out on the dance floor everyone, dicty and rat, rubbed joyously elbows, laughing, mingling, forgetting differences” (71, 74). In the “panorama” of Fisher’s Harlem, literary critic John McCluskey Jr. construes this dance floor as a “metaphor of democratic participation,” though one that is quickly ruptured by the author’s razor-sharp irony, since the moment the music stops, each repairs to his or her own “level”: a “tier of boxes that encircled the hall” for the “dicktys” and “ofays”; the round-top tables on the “terraces” for plain folks; and downstairs for the “rats” (City of Refuge 20, Jericho 72). But if The Walls of Jericho fails to merge its many classes into a fully constituted group, the conditions of community become the subject of The Conjure-Man Dies. In this book, the “locked room” of classical detective fiction affords Fisher the means to articulate the strange stakes of community formation in black Harlem.

In her discussion of the premises of classical detective fiction, Joan
Copjec focuses on the act of suture that the introduction of the locked-room paradox facilitates. Copjec’s starting point is a well-known essay by Jacques-Alain Miller, which defines suture by drawing on Frege’s concept of the number “not identical with itself”: it is “the excess which operates” in logical discourse; it is summoned only to be rejected by the discourse of logic “in order to constitute itself as that which it is” (Miller 32). Miller’s claim is founded Frege’s assertion, in Grundlagen der Arithmetik that a theory of natural numbers can be logically established only with the introduction of the number 0 (the number that belongs to the concept not identical with itself). Frege’s logicist project proceeds from the belief that numbers are independent objects and not attributes, and that statements about numbers belong to substantival rather than adjectival constructions (Beaney 106). For Miller, by contrast, Frege’s “impossible object” shows us the Lacanian subject in its relation to the signifying chain; it is that which must be introduced “in order for the logical dimension to gain its autonomy definitively, without any reference to the real” (29), and it is, more important yet, what the discourse of logic “summons and rejects wanting to know nothing of it” (32). Copjec applies this theory of suture to the locked-room paradox, describing the creation of the “locked room” as a nonempirical “obligatory addition” brought to “the series of signifiers in order to mark the lack of a signifier that could close the set” (176). Moreover, since Copjec links the birth of classical detective fiction with the appearance of modern statistics—a form of political science that deals “with the collection, classification, and discussion of facts (especially of a numerical kind) bearing on the condition of a state or community” (OED)—the implications of the locked-room paradox extend beyond the ousting of a criminal individual from a small circle of suspects. Indeed, the locked-room paradox poses “one of the most fundamental questions of political modernism.” Copjec asks,

How, after destroying the body of the king, which formerly defined the boundary of the nation and thus closed the set of subjects belonging to it, how then does one constitute a modern nation? What is it that allows the nation to collect a vast array of people, discount all their positive differences, and count them as citizens, as members of the same set, in logical terms as identical? This question poses itself within detective fiction which, classically, begins with an amorphous and diverse collection of characters and ends with a fully constituted group. (174)
On these terms, what is at stake in classical detective fiction is nothing less than the “legal-rational legitimacy” of the modern nation-state.

This analysis partially supports the widely held critical consensus that detective fiction momentarily calls into question the positive effects of individual freedom as espoused within the framework of classical liberalism, only to dispel the specter of chaos and anarchy embodied by the criminal hidden in our midst. The function of the detective, in this vein, is to banish a “regime of doubt and confusion” and to transfigure a cast of scheming, suspicious, and self-serving individuals whose presence marks the failure of “communal bonds” to materialize. To put it briefly, the detective’s climactic elucidation of the crime gives us the switchpoint where civil society is cinched to the network of its own, disavowed “nightmarish inversion” (McCann 8). Copjec, however, goes a step beyond this typical claim that the detective’s habitual rooting-out of the “bad apple” preserves peace of mind. Whereas Franco Moretti calls the detective “the figure of the state in the guise of ‘night watchman’” whose “scientific system” is exercised only to ward off any challenge to the system and not used in service of that system’s advancement (Signs 155), Copjec is subtler, I think, in her presentation of the detective as therapist and not thug. Most importantly, her essay presents the locked-room paradox as a syntax of semantic glitches whose unraveling has sociopolitical freight; it is a pretext that “allows the nation to collect” and collate its members.

This paradoxical production of the nation is famously constituted in the snowbound Calais Coach that is the setting for Agatha Christie’s ingenious detection fiction Murder on the Orient Express (1934). In this celebrated text (which appeared just two years after the publication of The Conjure-Man Dies), an urgent telegraph to Istanbul summons Christie’s sleuth Hercule Poirot to London by way of the Orient Express bound for England via Calais, France. Aboard the curiously crammed train, Poirot and his close acquaintance Monsieur Bouc, the director of Compagnie Internationale des Wagons-Lits, marvel at the kaleidoscopic assortment of passengers that hail from multiple nations, cultures, and classes: a Swedish missionary from Africa, a Russian princess, an Italian car salesman, and so on. Most visually striking among these is an American philanthropist named Ratchett, whose “strange malevolence” and “unnatural tenseness in glance” so repulse Poirot that the detective spurns the philanthropist when he attempts to purchase Poirot’s services, coldly remarking, “I do not like your face, M. Ratchett” (34). When the train runs into a snowdrift that night and Ratchett is found
brutally stabbed to death the following morning, however, Poirot’s callous stance is vindicated. The so-called American philanthropist, it turns out, was the notorious gangster Cassetti, who kidnapped and murdered the child Daisy Armstrong in America some years ago. But as the train is snowed in somewhere in Yugoslavia and the assassin deprived of the possibility of escape, Poirot concludes that the murderer must have remained on the train, so that each member of the international troupe of passengers becomes a suspect—and yet every one of them has a remarkably strong alibi provided by his or her fellow travelers. When M. Bouc, frantic with confusion, remarks, “How can he [the murderer] have vanished into thin air? My head, it whirs. Say something, then, my friend, I implore you. Show me how the impossible can be possible!” the sleuth counters: “It is a good phrase that,” said Poirot. “The impossible cannot have happened, therefore the impossible must be possible in spite of appearances” (156). Ronald Thomas contends that Christie underscores Ratchett’s criminality by employing “the language we have heard applied to the exotic criminal body in criminal anthropology and detective literature of the past”: he is “a wild animal—an animal savage,” like the throat-slitting orangutan of “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” (271). But while the “unequal voice” of Poe’s orangutan in “Rue Morgue” denoted a creature without a nation, the expression that proceeded from the victim’s locked cabin on the night of the murder was entirely intelligible. A peculiar voice—and not Ratchett’s, because he did not speak French, as we are repeatedly reminded—announced “Je me suis trompée,” which we might translate as “I was mistaken” or even “I misspoke.” This impossible voice, which speaks only to nullify its utterance, is precisely that nonempirical “obligatory addition” that constitutes the locked-room paradox that Copjec describes. Meanwhile, the multiplicity of accents aboard the Calais Coach leads Poirot unexpectedly to infer that every one of them is connected: the passengers and crew are the self-appointed executioners of Cassetti. How could such an assortment constitute a unity? Poirot explains:

The answer I made to myself was—only in America. In America there might be a household composed of just such varied nationalities—an Italian chauffeur, an English governess, a Swedish nurse, a French lady’s maid and so on. That led me to my scheme of “guessing”—that is, casting each person for a certain part in the Armstrong drama much as a producer casts a play. Well that gave me an extremely interesting and satisfactory result. (243)
Just as the ballroom in *The Walls of Jericho* enlists a balcony and stairs to separate the “dicktys” from the “rats,” the first- and second-class accommodations aboard the Orient Express spatialize the upstairs-downstairs arrangements in the Armstrong household. Nevertheless, the classes crossed paths in the dining compartment and, more pertinently, in Cassetti’s cabin, where, one by one, the self-selected jury of twelve plunged a knife into his back. For our purposes, though, it is worth observing that Christie’s imagined America included neither black accents nor even a Jim Crow car.

To summarize, Copjec provides us with a description of classical detective fiction in which the (allegorical) articulation of the community or nation depends on a differentially determined identity (the not-identical-with-itself), here identified as a logical incongruity we call the locked-room paradox. This possibility of successfully enunciating community by way of the locked-room mystery sets the stakes for *The Conjure-Man Dies*. In “A Corpse and Hocus Pocus in Harlem,” a review of Fisher’s book for the *New York World News*, Harry Hansen conceded, “Everything in the tale is Harlem, and you’d be surprised to find how complete a world it is in its own way.” But the Harlem community that is the subject of Fisher’s text is more ruptured than resolved, and this tension is underscored by Fisher’s text.

**A MYSTIC CHAMBER**

Negro problems are problems of human beings . . . they cannot be explained away by fantastic theories, ungrounded assumptions or metaphysical subtleties.

—W. E. B. DU BOIS, *THE PHILADELPHIA NEGRO: A SOCIAL STUDY*

N’Gana Frimbo “put his people in that spotlight and he stayed in the dark,” notes Detective Perry Dart when he scrutinizes the setup of the psychist’s inner sanctum (45). Each customer seated in the reception room was ushered through by a turbaned assistant for a consultation, settled in an “uncomfortably illuminated chair,” seeing nothing by the “blinding glare” of a hanging droplight aimed directly at his or her face (65, 66). Here the figure of the psychist appeared before them, but only as a “dark shadow,” and one that, according to the testimony of Jinx Jenkins, “seemed to fade away altogether and blend with the enveloping blackness beyond” as he spoke (67). An unseen eye discerned its clients’ troubles “in their faces” and reported them in a disembodied voice “so matter of fact and real” that it could “dispel
doubt and inspire confidence” in its subsequent predictions, however trivial or fantastic (67). Frimbo’s “mystic chamber,” clad from top to bottom with black velvet drapery and adumbrated as if it were designed for an illusionist, is the “obligatory addition,” the nonempirical something whose waiting room convenes a cross section of Harlem’s residents at the moment when the conjure-man is apparently and inexplicably struck dead (66). And Frimbo’s peculiar talent, as Dart discovers when he takes a seat at the psychist’s desk and becomes “merely a deeper shadow in the surrounding dimness,” was to irradiate the burdens of the past and present lurking in the darkest recesses of the mind, and to “change the course of a life” (45, 69).

While his acute powers of observation square with the bravura of a Sherlock Holmes, Frimbo is practitioner of an “applied determinism” whose ambitions lie beyond parlor tricks (226). He claims, “I can study a person’s face and tell his past, present, and future”—and typically does, displaying a remarkable breadth of knowledge, his enviable powers of deduction given over to a narrativization of social data that gestures at a whole person (226). Apart from his far-fetched declarations of divinity, Frimbo’s most astounding faculty is his sociological instinct. His thorough grasp of urban life and insight into its effects on black Americans adheres to the multifaceted model W. E. B. DuBois pioneered at the turn of the century. Making epistemological pillars of historicism and empiricist positivism, DuBois’s groundbreaking The Philadelphia Negro (1899) had forged a sociology capable of “deconstructing the sacrosanct Anglo-American idea of a preestablished social order obeying immutable natural laws” to account for the sociopolitical and economic forces that influenced black Americans’ lives (Saint-Arnaud 140). Chief among DuBois’s insights was his recognition of continuity between the past, present, and future of black Americans, whose history of enslavement is not detached “heritage” but an ongoing influence (140). Frimbo’s appreciation of a history of racial oppression as the intimate antecedent for contemporary black experience; his phenomenological grasp of urban conditions; and his inductive prognostications constitute a sociologist’s credentials. Furthermore, his narrativization of urban experience and close attention to human feeling bear some resemblance to the work of the Chicago school of sociology.

In the first few decades of the twentieth century, the University of Chicago’s sociologists attributed urban social problems—what they politely called “personal demoralization”—to demographic shifts in American cities due to the arrival of immigrants and rural migrants, namely, their transition from
“non-rational” and “primitive” social interactions that bound individuals together based on tradition or custom, also known as “primary group contacts” (gemeinschaft), to what sociologists perceived were the pragmatic relations associated with modern commercial societies and developed according to market forces, called “secondary group contacts” (gesellschaft) (Reed 20–21). Whereas primary social relations forfeited individuality and opportunity on the altar of personal obligation to the whole, and secondary social relations allowed individuals to profit from the many benefits of demographic and economic heterogeneity, the intermediate phase was characterized by “the collapse of institutional life” itself, not to mention the disintegration of morals and conduct that would make it increasingly difficult to maintain order. Consequently, sociologist W. I. Thomas’s social disorganization and reorganization theory proposed launching new social institutions that could alleviate the malaise of disorganization, bridging the gulf between gemeinschaft and gesellschaft. A cadre of “social technicians” (social workers) would provide assistance to rural migrants or immigrants, helping them develop voluntarist institutions like immigrant cooperatives, which could “mediate tensions between the individual and the community” but ultimately achieve the desired acculturation (21).

Variations and refinements on Thomas’s social disorganization and reorganization theory included the ethnic cycle, an assimilationist model created by sociologist Robert Park, who advocated for constant relations between peoples to create “an organic cultural exchange that infused elements of each culture into one” (22), and urban ecology (another of Park’s inventions), which presented urban space as “a functioning organism” and divided the city according to economic processes and the distribution of populations in various districts (23). Social disorganization and reorganization, ethnic cycle, and urban ecology theory opposed scientific racism and nativist prejudice in their insistence that race and ethnicity were merely social constructs. Nevertheless, the Chicago school’s assumption that black and white ethnics would encounter identical challenges to assimilation, and its dark logic that “crime and poverty were the consequences of institutional decay; ethnic ghettos were simply part of a natural process of succession; and conflict between groups would whither on its own” limited the initiatives available to the Urban League, which wholeheartedly swallowed the guidance Chicago’s social theorists had to offer and focused its programs on developing workplace competence and public manners (26). One study of African American families in Harlem indicated that median income plummeted almost
50% between 1929 and 1930, but in 1931 the New York Urban League offered limited industrial and domestic training as its only prescription for what it euphemistically referred to as “enforced leisure” (107, 76–77).

By contrast, in The Conjure-Man Dies, N’Gana Frimbo’s is a “social-technician” of sorts; under the guise of his “conjuring,” the psychist offers career coaching, marriage counseling, practical psychology, and medical advice to the individuals who assemble in his waiting room. Aramintha Snead, a onetime migrant from Savannah, arrives determined to put an end to the unremitting abuse of her husband, a shiftless drunk who “greets me at the door with a cuff side o’ the head,” she explains to the police, “jes’ by way of interdiction” (Fisher 81). Unsatisfied with the minister’s unvarying counsel (“Daughter take it to the Lord in prayer” [81]) and with two years’ perfect attendance at prayer meetings down the drain, Mrs. Snead repudiates religious instruction in favor of Frimbo’s conjuring: “I been takin’ it to the Lord in prayer long enough. Now I’m goin’ take it to the devil” (81). Drug addict Doty Hicks entered the conjure-man’s chamber convinced that Frimbo had cast an evil spell on his brother at the behest of the brother’s show-gal wife, but Frimbo has clarified all: “He simply has pulmonary tuberculosis—in the third stage. He had had it for at least three months when your sister-in-law came to me for advice” (114). Numbers runner Spider Webb claims he was present to take Frimbo’s bet and to take advantage of Frimbo’s “system of playing the game that couldn’t lose” (137), while Pullman porter Easley Jones came to consult the psychist on a matter of infidelity.

Bubber Brown, formerly of the DSC (Department of Street Cleaning), lost his municipal employment, but attempted a fresh start as a private detective, figuring that in Harlem, “The only business what was flourisbin’ was monkey-business” (49). Nevertheless, Bubber lacks vocational training—or shall we say, professional discretion—a sad deficiency that becomes impossible to ignore after he successfully conceals himself behind a trunk in a lady’s boudoir to witness an illicit tryst, but then knocks over the trunk to surprise the lovers in flagrante delicto. “Only I thing I wanted to detect,” he confesses, “was the quickest way out” (53). Accordingly, Bubber was on hand to ask Frimbo for professional advice. Meanwhile, Bubber’s close friend Jinx Jenkins is really down and out, and did not even need to admit as much to Frimbo, who began their appointment with this “simple statement of fact, presented as a comprehensive résumé of a situation” (68). In his “mystic chamber,” Frimbo recapitulated Jenkins’s plight: weeks of unemployment, plummeting hope, the humiliating necessity of procuring “the financial aid
of your friends” and even of borrowing money to pay Frimbo’s fee (68). The
psychist prophesized Jenkins would have “food and shelter in abundance,”
but little happiness, in the immediate future, a prediction that foreshadows
Jenkins’s stay in prison as the conjure-man’s suspected killer. More “uncer-
tain fortunes” would follow these, Frimbo observed, and presumably the
conjure-man would have offered additional guidance on such matters had
he not been unceremoniously assassinated.

By and large, the Harlem Fisher depicts lacks social institutions that can
contend with the problems his characters face. Nevertheless, the community
Fisher presents is characterized by a shared determination to surmount fis-
cal deprivation and physical abuse, constituted by its search for an end to the
social “disorganization” and widespread economic malaise in Depression-era
Harlem. Paradoxically, the constitution of the community via the detective
fiction formula depends on the assassination of the conjure-man, who is
apparently the sole provider or social worker with the wisdom necessary
to prevail in these desperate circumstances. Ultimately, the materialization
of Fisher’s Harlem requires coming to terms with the absence of an omni-
scent and omnipotent “social technician,” the community fixture or com-
munal fantasy whose integrity, it turns out, was—like King Solomon Gil-
li’s “cullud policemans”—compromised all along. “Killing” the conjure-man
becomes an ambivalent compulsion of the text, and it is one that Fisher used
the devices of detection to do.

The collective substance of Frimbo’s sessions, which are folded into clas-
sical detective fiction’s routine cross-examination of its witnesses, coalesces
into a variegated sketch of city life—a collective ethnography, if you will, of
Depression-era Harlem. Moreover, Fisher’s narrator pencils in the sounds
and sights of Harlem’s streets when the police round up their suspects. In
this way, too, the study that Fisher undertakes is something like the Chicago
school sociology of his time. In Sociology Noir: Studies at the University of
Chicago in Loneliness, Marginality and Deviance, 1915–1935, Roger Salerno
explains that Chicago school sociologists used ethnography to investigate
urban conditions, and regarded narrative as a suitable instrument for de-
picting metropolitan life (170). Their distinct and somewhat controversial
“pedestrian research” of urban experience differed sharply from the theoreti-
cal work and anthropological studies of European sociologists (166). If else-
where sociologists consolidated social survey data in mind-numbing tables
and graphs, the monographs of the Chicago school were powered by Ver-
stehen, a term Max Weber used to capture the “quest to understand human
behavior in terms of feeling, motivation and spirit” (52). Salerno contends that these innovative studies comprised an art form equal to the finest literature of that period (152). Carla Cappetti’s *Writing Chicago* goes so far as to suggest that novelistic and autobiographical studies of the city by the likes of Richard Wright, James T. Farrell, and Nelson Algren should be shelved alongside the theoretical and empirical writings produced by Chicago’s urban sociologists (2).

In this same vein, we might label Fisher a literary sociologist for his thick descriptions of urban experience and distinctive characters, as well as for the blend of “artistic imagination and the scientific method” McCluskey perceives in *The Conjure-Man Dies* (*City of Refuge* 27). And if N’Gana Frimbo plays the social technician, fashioning theoretical and empirical accounts of life in Harlem, then astonishing his clientele by recounting their misfortunes, Fisher’s foray into urban ethnography is more complex still. Since this detection fiction begins with the conjure-man’s “death,” police detective Perry Dart’s interrogations must pry Frimbo’s dealings and prognostications from the late conjure-man’s clients. To speak of their encounters with the “departed” psychist requires they reproduce Frimbo’s account of their troubles and also offset his account with their own. The result is a self-signifyin(g), as each suspect becomes the mouthpiece for his own exogenous ethnography, though adding an endogenous echo by way of critique. These dialogic descriptions of individual experience sometimes pitch science and superstition side by side and in unresolved tension. They are also intersubjective labyrinths that lure the language of one man out of the mouth of another. Fisher takes an unusual stab at reverse focalization in the case of Jinx Jenkins, who enters the mystic chamber with a defensive “mask of scowling ill-humor” and, when asked by Dart to identify himself, growls, “I mean I say I’m who I is. Who’d know better?” (65). Yet as he begins to describe his interlocutions with Frimbo, Fisher notes,

> His imperfections of speech became negligible and were quite ignored; indeed, the more tutored minds of his listeners filled in or substituted automatically, and both the detective and the physician, the latter perhaps more completely, were able to observe the reconstructed scene as if it were even now being played before their eyes. (66)

Jenkins idiosyncratic grammar and colloquialisms recede from the text, and we are apparently presented with a perfectly transparent account of a
subjective experience, albeit paradoxically depersonalized. This bit of fine-tuning makes Jenkins, as he tells his own story, the mouthpiece and medium of narrative itself—though he is merely one of many men bringing his troubles to the office of the conjure-man. But this fantasy of access to the social margins and the textured variety of urban life through an intersubjective network of overlapping reports is precisely that: a fantasy. And the “mystic chamber” that amalgamates so many voices is also a crime scene—where a man who appeared to be N’Gana Frimbo was choked to death, a handkerchief stuffed into his larynx by a brilliant assassin, given that the assassin was, as John Archer marvels, “bright enough to think up a gag like this” (23).

RHAPSODY IN BLACK AND BLUE

I cheerfully admit the “escape” motive in the crotchet that divides my interest with the detective story—books on strange and out-of-the-way corners of the world. Tibet, Greenland, the Australian wilds, desert China, the reaches of the Amazon—they and their denizens perennially fascinate me, and I know why. It is because they are the farthest extreme from the seemingly tame and ordered life that civilization has wished upon me. But the detective story doesn’t interest me in that way at all.

—HARRISON R. STEEVES, “A SOBER WORD ON THE DETECTIVE STORY”

An August 21, 1932, review of The Conjure-Man Dies in the Long Island Daily Press proposed that “here was another piece of lively art, a work bound up with racial feeling and as perfect as a dance intricacy by Bill Robinson, a rhythm by Cab Calloway or a spiritual by Paul Robeson.” The Press’s citation of other black American cultural forms situates Fisher’s book amid distinctly African American entertainments rather than in the realm of predominately white-authored detective fiction, but its associative connection with jazz, dance, and spirituals likely reflects Fisher’s very conscious interpolation of a multitude of black cultural texts into his own. When, for instance, police officer Hanks and Bubber Brown make a stop at the Hip-Toe Club on Lenox Avenue to pick up dope dealer Doty Hicks for questioning, Bubber stops dead in his tracks, captivated by a shapely dancer who “was proving beyond question the error of reserving legs for mere locomotion” (Fisher 102). Later on, Bubber tries to dodge Tiger Shade, a flunky for numbers runner Spider Webb who “done agreed to lay for you and remove both yo’ winnin’s and yo’ school gal complexion” (234 ) by slipping into Mr. Crouch’s
morgue and playing ghost beneath a sheet in the undertaker’s parlor. An eerie chorus wafts through the wall from an adjacent Sunday church meeting, terrifying Bubber with its wistful query, “Lord, was I born to die—/To lay this body down?” (244). The juke joint is an interlude in the investigation, and the church and the crime scene are overlapping spaces. In other words, Fisher’s crime novel is not standard literary reflection with an ethnic “flavor”; instead, the detective formula has to contend with the milieu it depicts.

The *Daily Press* calls *The Conjure-Man Dies* “a mystery with a theme song,” since the book first page gives way to “the frequent uplifting of merry voices in the moment’s most popular song” (Fisher 3):

I’ll be glad when you’re dead, you rascal you,
I’ll be glad when you’re dead, you rascal you.
What is it that you’ve got
Makes my wife think you so hot?
Oh you dog—I’ll be glad when you’re gone!

Just as the printed notes that begin every chapter of W. E. B. DuBois’s *The Souls of Black Folk* evokes an “unarticulated text (the unprinted words)” for the reader conversant in musical notation (Sundquist 470), these lines supply a cue—that is, a clue—to the jazz literate. As a sort of musical overture, the lyrics of Samuel Allen Theard (Spo-De-Odee)’s smash hit “I’ll Be Glad When You’re Dead, You Rascal You” supply a narrative preview and synopsis to the initiated, who might make out the murderer’s motive (adultery and revenge) and pinpoint the killer when he appears: Easly Jones, a man who claims to be a Pullman porter, and who explains to the police exactly why he sought the services of the conjure-man N’Gana Frimbo—“I was hyer to ask ’bout my wife—was she true to me or f’ru with me” (129). It seems worth emphasizing that this “theme song” is neither an epigraph, nor exactly a subtext, but a concomitant composition that takes the part of the murderer without giving him away. Its intermittent surfacing in the storyline implies a different sort of relationship than code and key. Is one riffing on the other? Or if Fisher lays out Theard’s lyric in the first page of the text, is the investigation that follows an improvisation on this “establishing shot”?

Of course, it is very often the case in classical detective fiction that the corpse is particularly susceptible to murder. Franco Moretti points out that in many of Arthur Conan Doyle’s stories, a prior transgression sets the stage for the murder plot. “The victim, that is, has *asked for it,* having committed
some offense against the murderer (what we might call in Fisher’s text a “rascal-ism”) that compels retaliation (Signs 136)—though in the golden era what we typically find is that nearly all of the circle of suspects have perfectly legitimate objections to his remaining alive. Consequently, the investigators happen across any number of motives for bumping off the person in question; as Roger Caillois notes, “each enigma” in the puzzle mystery “is subject to as many solutions as the imagination can invent for it” (“Game” 3). In S. S. Van Dine’s The Benson Murder Case (1926), for instance, aesthete and amateur detective Philo Vance lays out a solid circumstantial and material case against no less than six suspects for the murder of Wall Street broker Alvin Benson: Mrs. Anna Platz, the housekeeper, clearly disliked the man—and could have done it, too, as a “shrewd, determined German type” (141); Lothario loafer and big-game hunter Leander Pryce needed back some borrowed jewels he used for collateral to pay a debt to his father-in-law (and well deserved some sort of criminal sentence, “if only for the way he dresses,” notes Vance [145]); Muriel St. Clair, ingénue and single singer Cinderella suspected Benson of toying with her money on the market and could have shot him cold when he got awfully close to toying with her; Captain Philip Leacock resolved to protect the reputation of his fiancé Miss St. Clair, and so on. The detective’s intellectual calisthenics are sufficiently diverting to take the reader’s mind off murder as moral transgression, or death as human tragedy, per se (and we are little concerned with the morality of the thing, Moretti points out: “Agatha Christie’s first book is set at the same time as the massacres of the Great War, yet the only murder of interest occurs on the second floor of Styles Court” [Signs 135]). More to the point, the extraordinary calculus of motives and means ends by substantiating the murdered party’s villainy, leaving little time to lament his death. This tendency seems to verify Caillois’s observation that the puzzle mystery is “cold and sterile, perfectly cerebral” (11).

Proving the deceased was singularly predisposed to face unlawful death cannot be exactly what Fisher had in mind, though, since Frimbo is not, it turns out, the target of more than two or three homicidal imperatives, nor does he appear to be the “lady-killer” Theard’s song depicts. Perusing Frimbo’s “luxuriously appointed” apartment and finding neither “frills” nor a trace of perfume, Sergeant Dart goes so far as to conclude that Frimbo is a “woman hater,” though Dr. Archer is mystified by this “over-absence of the feminine” and speculates the psychist might have been “a Lothario of the deepest dye” (23–25). Instead, Fisher’s paraphrasings of the sexual tomfool-
eries in “You Rascal, You” materialize as several subplots in which N’Gana Frimbo is only peripherally involved.

As a self-minted street detective who specializes in “monkey-business. Cheatin’—backbitin’, and all like that” (49) and whose card promises “evidence obtained in affairs of the heart” (48), Bubber Brown becomes well versed in infidelity. He takes two dollars from an evil-looking woman to discover whether her husband is consorting with an attractive woman in the ticket box at the theater. “Keepin’ my eyes on her was the easiest work I ever did in my life,” reports Brown (51). Meanwhile, hopped-up Doty Hicks holds Frimbo’s conjuring responsible for the infirmity of his brother Spats, who grabbed his show-gal wife, “smacked her cross-eyed” for taking up with a sugar daddy, and soon afterward succumbed to pulmonary tuberculosis (112). These minor riffs on a major theme (the hard-boiled and social realist variations that are adjacent to the ratiocinative) change our perception of the detective genre and its narrative functions. The puzzle mystery, in this case, shifts its status from langue to parole; it is not a meaning-making device but a sound vernacular, whose capacity is entirely adjectival, and that modifies a substantive category that Theard titles “You Rascal, You” but Bubber Brown simply calls “monkey-business” (51).

If we take jazz as our metaphorical prompt, then in Fisher’s text the detective fiction formula might cease to function as narrative syntax and start to serve as something like sonic material, a scat-styled rendering of pure narrative whose gist as detective fiction is shy of intelligible. But how does one use generic syllables to move beyond genre talk? Murder, motives, means, investigation, revelation—all the usual suspects of the mystery—might be detached from intelligible combinations, as they are, for instance, with Frimbo’s uncanny reappearance midway through The Conjure-Man Dies as an ex-cadaver turned amateur detective who “walked in, sat down, and pronounced himself thoroughly alive” (172). Nothing has prepared Detective Perry Dart for the eventuality: “It swept the very foundation out from under the structure which his careful reasoning had erected and rendered it all utterly and absurdly useless” (172). On the other hand, Caillois declares that shuffling and inverting generic conventions is customary within the genre of detective fiction, since to restore novelty to the intellectual exercise, the author may be “forced into audacities that sometime seem excessive” (8). Any shock to the system, then, even one that swaps a corpse for a sleuth, is predictable and necessary, “commonplace” within this genre (8). Still, Fisher does his best to defamiliarize the logic, narrative and otherwise, that is the foundation of
184 dreams for dead bodies
detection. Some way into the investigation, the reanimated N’Gana Frimbo
diverts Dr. Archer with discourse on “diverse and curious topics,” turning the
amateur sleuth’s attention from “the mystery of this assault” that he hoped to
probe (228–29). Plying the doctor with bold metaphysical talk, Frimbo al-
ludes to “an order in which a cause followed its effect instead of preceding it”
and proclaims himself an inhabitant of that other, nondeterministic order
(227). Scoffing at Archer’s methods, Frimbo announces that “genuine mys-
tery is incalculable” and cautions the doctor that “the profoundest mysteries
are those things which we blandly accept without question” (230). Finally,
the psychist disputes the utility of the investigation outright, demanding,
“What on earth does it really matter who killed Frimbo—except to Frim-
bo?” (230). Frimbo’s open critique of the concerns of detective fiction, added
to Fisher’s shifts in the usual narrative syntax and his juggling of generic
elements—not the least of which is Frimbo’s literal detachment from his
role as corpse and his reappearance as a kind of metaphysical sleuth—dispel
some of the order that genre fiction habitually imposes, without effacing its
individual parts.

This synchronized semiconstitution and dissolution of detective fiction
(an activity that is at least hinted at, or even partially encapsulated in the
title The Conjure-Man Dies) yield a carefully articulated inarticulacy, whose
methods bear comparison to scat singing in jazz. Scat singing is often por-
trayed as a form of vocal improvisation concerned with “dissociating the
vocal line of verbal meaning” in order to approximate instrumentalist perfor-
ance, which is uninhibited by “extra-musical associations” (the denotative
sense of expressive speech), but this “crossover” characterization precludes
understanding the practice as an “expressive medium in its own right” (Bau-
er, “Scat” 303–4). Take its apocryphal (indeed, entirely false) origins in Louis
Armstrong’s February 26, 1926, recording of “The Heebie Jeebie Dance” with
his Hot Five, when Armstrong supposedly dropped the printed lyrics and
commenced to scat rather than break up the recording session. Brent Hayes
Edwards points out that reports of this “fortuitous fumble” postulate a per-
foration between written and oral to account for “the way that Armstrong’s
voice peels gradually away from the reiteration of the chorus, and from lin-
guistic signification altogether,” which, importantly, “happens as a kind of
erosion or disarticulation, not a sudden loss: ‘Say you don’t know it, you
don’t dawduh, / Da w fee blue, come on we’ll teach you’” (618–20). We might
treat these quasi-verbal vocables, which land us somewhere between “abso-
lute” music and intelligible syntax, as a distinct form, however; consider, for
example, that the “subtle melodic inflections and timbral effects” of Armstrong’s scat singing can’t be recorded according to the parsimonious conventions of standard musical notation (Bauer, “Armstrong” 137), and are better deciphered by a linguist than a lyricist. As a consequence of both “dispossession and invention, perdition and predication, catastrophe and chance,” scat seems to constitute an idiosyncratic idiom of its own (Edwards 620). Crucially, however, Edwards suggest that the distinctive sounds popularized by jazz artists like Cab Calloway and Louis Armstrong belong on a continuum with other cultural productions that deliberately mobilized “linguistic deformity” in ways that attached “illiteracy” and “inarticulacy” to nonwhites (627). Jazz songs from the early twentieth century regularly featured “alterity projected onto the level of linguistic impenetrability and absurdity,” from the mock Chinese in Gene Green’s “From Here to Shanghai” (1917) to the “equal opportunity scat reification” in Slim and Slam’s counterfeit-Chinese “Chinatown, My Chinatown” (1938), ersatz-Yiddish “Matzoh Balls” (1939), and simulated-savage “African Jive” (1941) (627).

This broader category of racially tendentious (but also potentially ambivalent) modes of representation, to which the conventions of blackface minstrelsy and dialect fiction, with its eccentric, often demeaning orthography, are routinely assigned, might also include American detective fiction of the mid-1920s to the mid-1930s. Maureen Reddy proposes that the description of “blond Satan” Sam Spade that opens Dashiell Hammett’s The Maltese Falcon is a “specifically racial code” and, pointing to dehumanizing stereotypes in hard-boiled detective stories like Hammett’s “Dead Yellow Woman,” concludes that racism “is in fact a cornerstone of that fiction’s ideological orientation” (6, 27). By contrast, Thomas argues that Hammett presents “foreignness” as a more suggestive, amorphous quality and consequence of British and American imperialism: there is an “aura of unintelligible foreignness,” Thomas contends, in the contents of Joel Cairo’s wallet, which includes “a much-visaed Greek passport bearing Cairo’s name portrait; five folded sheets of pinkish onion-skin paper covered with what seemed to be Arabic writing”; “a post-card photograph of a dusky woman with bold cruel eyes and a tender drooping mouth”; and a handful of United States, British, French, and Chinese coins” (Thomas 265, Hammett 47).

Representations of ethnic, racial, and national variety also appealed to American practitioners of the puzzle mystery, whose prodigious experiments in constructing foreignness belied one of Ronald A. Knox’s commandments for detective fiction: “No Chinaman must figure in the story”
Amateur sleuth Philo Vance’s “omnivorous reading in languages other than English, coupled with his amazingly retentive memory, had a tendency to affect his own speech,” S. S. Van Dine (Willard Wright) informs the reader, but it is the man’s wealth of exaggerated Anglicisms (“The chap’s dead, don’t y’ know,” or “Most consid’rate . . . eh, what, Markham?”) that prove irksome and at times unbearable (14, 16, 17). One can’t help but note, moreover, that “Vance’s Manhattan appears not to extend beyond 125th Street” (Van Dover 90) and that the sleuth’s adage “Culture is polyglot” applies principally to “the world’s intellectual and aesthetic achievements” and not at all to its persons (Van Dine 14n). Vance does lend a sympathetic ear to Egyptian Anupu Hani’s grievances against artifact-pilfering Westerners in The Scarab Murder Case (1930), and he talks Boxer Rebellion and ceramics with Liang Tsung Wei, an Imperial and Oxford University–educated activist (who is also, for reasons that are never explained or called into question, a white man’s cook) in the blithely anachronistic The Kennel Murder Case (1933) (Van Dover 90–92). Ultimately, Philo Vance’s cosmopolitan engagements are limited the foreigner willing to function as a mouthpiece for antiques.

By contrast, fantasy foreign accents were bread and butter for an author born and raised in Canton, Ohio, and educated at Harvard: Earl Derr Biggers, whose rotund Chinese police detective Charlie Chan is given over to “reckless wanderings among words of unlimitable English language” (qtd. in Huang 17). Chan’s makeshift Confucianisms and subject-free aphorisms (e.g. “Murder like potato chip—cannot stop at just one” [300]) bear no resemblance to actual pidgin. In a 1929 letter to a friend, Biggers explained, “If he talked good English, as he naturally would, he would have no flavor, and if he talked pidgin, no mainland reader would tolerate him for one chapter” (qtd. in Van Dover 73). In the case of this ethnic detective, “Authenticity is a red herring,” claims critic J. K. Van Dover (74); Chan’s contrived and blunder-ridden English and his fat form (with cheeks “chubby as a baby” [37]) became his signature and calling card—and a far cry from the wiry lean strength of his whip-wielding, real-life counterpart, Hawaiian police detective Chang Apana, who was, incidentally, fluent in Chinese and Hawaiian and spoke pidgin English. In fact, in The House without a Key (1925), the first in the Charlie Chan series, Boston Brahmin John Quincy Winterslip is duped by a Honolulu crook impersonating Chan over the phone. “You savvy locality?” the voice demands, arranging a rendezvous in Honolulu’s Chinatown (Biggers 120). This was, Winterslip later reflects, “a clumsy attempt at Chan’s style, but Chan was a student of English; he dragged his
words painfully from the poets; he was careful to use nothing that savored of ‘pidgin’” (121). And Chan's speech acquires a new dimension of factitiousness in *The Chinese Parrot* (1926), when the detective disguises himself as houseboy Ah Kim to protect a $300,000 strand of pearls from foul play from the enemies of magnate P. J. Madden: “All my life,” Chan grumbles to Bob Eden, the son of a prominent jeweler, “I study to speak fine English words. Now I must strangle all such in my throat, lest suspicion rouse up. Not a happy situation for me” (Biggers 184). Suffocated by this spurious tongue that simulates a racist stereotype of broken English, Biggers's undercover Chan (inadvertently?) signifies against his creator, who took his own ideas of “yellowface” as requisite for the detective's professional success. These layers of linguistic irregularities and phony “foreign” talk approach absurdity, but should also redirect our attention to epistemological pretexts as the most certain source of mystery: Ah Kim is no houseboy; nor is P. J. Madden. P. J. Madden, it turns out, is but a crook impersonating the multimillionaire. N’Gana Frimbo makes this point more explicitly in *The Conjure-Man Dies*. “You are almost white,” Frimbo tells Dr. Archer. “I am almost black. Find out why, and you will have solved a mystery” (230).

By engaging the detective genre, Fisher deliberately enters into an “an enduring voyeuristic economy between whites and African Americans” that is central to the history of an American modernism (Borshuk 3). Rather than treating an African American aesthetic as extraneous or unconnected to the preoccupations of Anglo-American modernism, Fisher foregrounds his participation in an interracial modernism with a performance of genre conventions that veers between an absolute music and intelligible syntax. Significantly, white representations of black accents in the first few decades of the twentieth century frequently associated African Americans with a “savage” and “primitive” Africa. For example, white poet Vachel Lindsay indiscriminately collapsed impressions of linguistic deformity, drunken barbarity, and Africa in his “own personal idea of jazz”: the racist rhyme “The Congo,” which portrayed “fat black bucks” pounding on wine barrels and warned, “Be careful what you do, / Or Mumbo-Jumbo, God of the Congo, / And all of the other / Gods of the Congo, / Mumbo-Jumbo will hoo-doo you” (qtd. in Anderson 27). However, at a moment when black dialect, “a resort freely open only to whites,” was regarded as “linguistic slovenliness” but also a foil for unsullied and utterly illusory “pure” English (North 24), Fisher's multiple registers of “black” talk and intersubjective narrative style contest a simplistic, insidious “cult of primitivism.” At the same time, his de-
piction of urban modernity escapes pressures to deliver “proper,” respectable images of black life that were no less “consigned brutally to type” (Thaggert 8). Fisher pushes against what Miriam Thaggert calls “the chain of both stereotypical portrayals and mimetic, transparently ‘positive’ or literal representations” (8), facetiously foregrounding his own role as literary (and, to some extent, linguistic) sociologist whose principal narratological tool is a generic pretext that demands a hybrid enunciation of community. Capturing the feeling, motivation, and spirit (Verstehen) of black urban life entails a fantasy of sociolinguistic access that the detective genre, with the prestidigitation of its locked-room paradox, supplies. After all, “Our very faith in reason is a kind of mysticism,” as Frimbo explains to Dr. Archer in The Conjure-Man Dies (214).

Fisher’s enterprise can be clarified, perhaps, by exploring another version of the musical refrain that runs through the book. The Fleischman Brothers offered a provocative illustration of faux-foreign accents in their 1932 animated short I’ll Be Glad When You’re Dead, You Rascal, You, which features Louis Armstrong and the Hot Five in a rendition of Rudolph Fisher’s “theme” song, alongside an extraordinarily tanned Betty Boop on jungle safari with Bimbo the Dog and Koko the Clown. In this short, Betty is abducted by androgynous, frond-clad cartoon cannibals, a turn of events that seems designed to corroborate centuries-old racist fantasies (O’Meally 288). Moreover, as Koko and Bimbo rush to Betty’s rescue, they are hounded by a single “savage” suddenly transfigured as an animated, disembodied head that dissolves into Armstrong’s face as film image, gaily crooning and scat singing “You Rascal, You.” At another moment, the film turns to Armstrong’s drummer, Alfred “Tubby” Hall, whose film image temporarily dissolves into that of the animated cannibal cook, rhythmically stirring a stewpot.

Rather than simply cross-cutting between the captivity narrative and the Armstrong band, the cartoon casts Armstrong “as a primitive among primitives” (290), although its fusion of musical and visual forms lends itself to a kind of productive interaction between the artists and the stereotypes the film appears to foist upon him. The short is billed as a Betty Boop cartoon, and yet the animated adventure arbitrates its jazz “accompaniment,” while the musical entertainment encroaches upon the animation. “Despite its ‘fried chicken’ lyrics and foolishness,” Robert O’Meally writes, the Fleischman Brothers’ short “is unmistakable in its aggressive declarations that its singer will be glad when ‘you’—the ‘whites’ in the cartoon? Betty? The producers? The audience?—are all dead” (290). The soundtrack sandwiches
“You Rascal, You” between snippets of “High Society” and “Chinatown, My Chinatown,” showcasing Armstrong as a musical shape-shifter who switches accents on a dime. The footprints Koko and Bimbo track through the jungle abruptly swing about-face even as the hunters examine them—an instance of flip-flopping that suggests those who can’t accommodate investigative indirection are bound to be hopelessly misled.

In The Conjure-Man Dies, Fisher regularly turns to Africa in order to effect generic distantiation, and so undercuts the narrative logic and ends classical detection resolves to embody. First, when Dr. Archer and Detective Dart inspect the conjure-man’s study, they leap into a series of speculations about the dead man’s origins. Spotting a set of framed documents on the wall, Archer comments:

“Bachelor’s degree from Harvard. N’Gana Frimbo. N’Gana—”
“No West Indian?”
“No. This sounds definitely African to me. Lots of them have that N’.
The ‘Frimbo’ suggests it, too—mumbo—jumbo—sambo—”
“Limbo—” (27)

Archer first condenses Frimbo’s origins into an associative string of syllables that incorporates first the ritual “babble” of an imaginary Africa and then a low-down epithet for an American slave, following an itinerary of the “Africa-to-Dixie-to-Harlem narrative model” that habitually structured all-black revues of the 1920s (Howland 332)—though Archer stops somewhat short of Harlemese, never arriving at the black metropolis. Instead, Dart’s supplement qua interruption, “limbo,” suggests a borderland, or intermediary state for the deceased (which, unbeknownst to either Dart or Archer, fairly accurately describes the condition of Frimbo, who only appears to be dead). It also thrusts a wedge in the pattern Archer proposes, which takes its cues from commercial entertainment, rather than Frimbo himself. Indeed, Frimbo embodies such an unusual, far-fetched combination of attributes, “a native African, a Harvard graduate, a student of philosophy—and a sorcerer,” that Archer is inclined to dismiss the story outright as one that cannot be told, declaring, “There’s something wrong with that picture” (27–28). Dart’s interjection, however, advises against such “premature conclusions,” and Archer profits from the instruction: days into the investigation, Archer pronounces a decided preference for inductive reasoning over the deductive kind—a preference he claims to have adopted from a “nice fellow . . . even
though he was a policeman” (206). And when Dart proceeds to jump to conclusions about the role Harlem's criminal elements might have played in Frimbo's death, Archer reminds the police detective of “the error of letting his imagination, instead of his observation, draw the conclusions,” again extolling this “lineal descendant of Francis Bacon—despite their difference of complexion,” who demanded facts dictate conclusions, rather than the reverse (206).

These admonitions against a type of narrative prejudice, which apparently operates at the facile level of oral association but is actually rooted in certain transatlantic flows, might be taken as a rebuke of the superficially innocuous grammar of classical detective fiction and the reading practices it prescribes. After all, although the puzzle mystery might be credited with “deautomatizing signification and making things ‘strange,’” or illuminating “a rich potentiality of unsuspected meanings” in mundane life that were heretofore inaccessible to the ordinary eye, the detective's interpretative acts are generally motivated by the impulse to reintegrate the newly unfamiliar into “accepted patterns of reality,” and thus reinstate customary patterns of meaning, cause, and effect (Hühn 454–55). By foregrounding inductive reasoning as the appropriate investigative route, Fisher suspends the stipulated outcomes that animate genre paradigms in favor of an unanticipated syntax.

The close associates Jinx Jenkins and Bubber Brown also appeal to Africa and its “dark” inhabitants in a series of comic exchanges and insults:

“You ought to be back in Africa with the other dumb boogies.”

“African boogies ain’t dumb,” explained Jinx. “They jes’ dark. You ain’t been away from there long, is you?”

“My folks,” returned Buber crushingly, “left Africa ten generations ago.”

“Yo’ folks? Shuh. Ten generations ago, you-all wasn’t folks. You-all hadn’t qualified as apes.” (33)

This procession of abuse—what Fisher calls an “exchange of compliments”—is, in fact, an “elaborate masquerade” that tests and testifies to a hidden but “genuine affection” between the two parties (33). To put this slightly differently, Jinx and Bubber enter into a sort of inverted shadowboxing, a verbal sparring that draws blood and relies on perilous questions of lineal descent—“yo’ granddaddy was a hair on a baboon’s tail. What does that make you?” (34)—that would under other circumstances trigger “instantaneous violence” in Harlem (33). Their open hostility and derogatory
names cannot but be misinterpreted by onlookers (Mrs. Aramintha Snead responds to this verbal jousting with a “cry of apprehension,” for instance, while a policeman’s “grin of amusement faded” [34]).

Jenkins and Brown are participants in a rite of camaraderie as collaborative deception that takes in even Harlem’s long-term residents; they are accomplices in a vernacular that differentiates between signifier and signified, like separating a map from the territory it describes. What we are presumably dealing with, then, is “some degree of meta-communication, i.e., of exchanging signals which would carry the message ‘this is play’” (Bateson 179), with the reader kept privy only insofar as Fisher’s omniscient narrator pulls back the veil. Stephen Soitos contends that the “‘mock’ genealogy” of this exchange “strikes two chords and suggests a third”: its traffic in apes invokes that exemplary folk creature, the “signifying monkey”; it pokes fun at racist imagery of blacks as brutes and beasts; and finally, it suggests “blacks’ pure thirst for their African heritage, which has been degraded, distorted, or erased by white control of their history” (Soitos 112). We might add a literary echo as well: that their genealogical inquiry, insofar as it pitches baboons and apes at the family annals, is a type of “monkey business” that implicitly alludes to detective fiction in one of its primordial appearances: Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Murders in the Rue Morgue,” which hinges on the incentives required for a sailor to claim an orangutan as his rightful property.

But what recompense comes of mobilizing such metacommunicative discourse (whose ostensible subject is African relations) at a historical moment when a reviewer could cite the benefits of the Harlem detective novel as anthropological document “because white folk, not knowing much about them [Negroes], believe them primitively prone to violence” and also offer the evidently deadpan observation that “Negroes are suitable for mystery stories because they are hard to see in the dark”?12 In play, as in dreams, the difference between map and territory, game strategies and the referential world, fact and fiction, can capsize or become indistinct. Like Bubber and Jenkins, who “come so close to blows that were never offered” (33), Fisher invokes Africa only to dispel his invocation as pure talk, exposing this idiom of “dark insults” and “Africanisms” as utterly detached from reality. Against the puzzle mystery, whose habit of tracing effect to cause or material residue to its source emulates the act of the genealogist, Bubber Brown’s and Jinx Jenkins’s irreverent cross-examinations highlight the secondary social work achieved by deconstructing one’s ancestry, even as Fisher plays with notion of his own text’s pedigree as it relates to detective fiction.

Finally, there is Frimbo’s story of his own native Buwongo. Dr. Archer is
a captive audience before the psychist, who “painted a picture twenty years past and five thousand miles away” of a ceremony witnessed as a child of twelve, shy of manhood, and son of a sovereign (216). This was the Malindo, a “feast of procreation,” Frimbo explains, a ceremony of the forty-eight tribes performed at night “at the height of the moon” in the central square of the town of Kimallu, where throngs of drummers conduct a “procession of shadowy figures” carrying a chest into the middle of the square, female torchbearers who kindle a circle of wood into an “unbroken ring of fire, symbol of eternal passion,” and an enormous black python, who emerges from the chest. A warrior hurdles through the flames carrying an infant above his head, which he hands to a dancing maiden (“though none has seen it happen”), who dances around the serpent with him, after which she leaps through the blaze and lays the infant at the king’s feet (221–23).

“Of all the rites,” Frimbo insists, “none is more completely symbolic” (218), but of what exactly? In To Make a New Race: Gurdjieff, Toomer, and the Harlem Renaissance, Jon Woodson argues that the procreative feast, Malindo, Frimbo describes is an “inserted text” that represents the ideas of the Greek-Armenian mystic, hypnotist (and to some, charlatan) George Ivanovich Gurdjieff, whose esoteric theories of human existence inspired Jean Toomer’s ideas about a raceless society and intrigued Zora Neale Hurston, Wallace Thurman, and George Schuyler, among others. Just as Frimbo’s assertions of control over cause and effect are “an allusion to Gurdjieff’s Law of the Octave, which describes ‘the discontinuity of vibration and . . . the deviation of forces’ in the universe,” Woodson notes, the Buwongo ritual theorizes how man might manipulate energy to change his state (92–93). Charles Scruggs offers a slightly less erudite and more persuasive interpretation of the Buwongo ritual as a representation of sexual propagation and community regeneration (with the snake as Damballah, the life force, at its center) as a public event in which the entire village is invested (164). More importantly, this communal ritual that Frimbo speaks of so reverentially places procreation equally in the hands of male and female, and so contrasts both with the psychist’s vulgar indifference to human sexual contact, which the bachelor Frimbo describes as merely “necessary to comfort, like blowing one’s nose” (Fisher 268), and with the underhanded affair he has conducted with Mrs. Crouch (Scruggs 165).

But these explications of Frimbo’s Africa must be contrasted against the conjure-man’s clearly bizarre “rite of the gonad”: Frimbo’s slightly disturbing habit of and displaying male sex glands among in his laboratory (most
recently, those of his murdered servant N’Ogo Frimbo). To perform this rite and “be master of his past,” Frimbo uses the “protoplasm which has been continuously maintained through thousands of generations” in the male sex organ (269). With its heavy-handed sexual primitivism and faux racial id in a jar, not to mention the expressly male-oriented ceremony whose focal point is a biological specimen that apparently embodies the “unbroken heritage of the past,” Frimbo’s secret rite is pure Freudian parody—a fact Dr. Archer allows for in his description of the whole business as Frimbo “compensatory mechanism” (Fisher 269, 291, Gosselin 616). Though many critics take Frimbo’s manifestations of ancestral pride at face value, it is not easy to maintain a straight face when Perry Dart violates Archer’s delicately phrased diagnosis of Frimbo’s idiosyncrasies, suggesting that the conjure-man killed his kinsman “because he’s a nut” (Fisher 290, Gosselin 616). Archer quickly responds with the quick-witted

Please—not so bluntly. It sounds crude—robbed of its nuances and subtleties. You transform a portrait into a cartoon. Say, rather, that under the influence of certain compulsions, associated with a rather intricate psychosis, he was impelled to dispose of his servant for definite reasons. (290)

Whereas Soitos reads Frimbo’s race consciousness and ancestralism as a nonexotic, constructive expression of primitivism, which can “forge a link between Africa and African Americans and redefine Africa as the homeland of racial purity and positive creative energies” (Soitos 97), Archer’s surfeit of tact (and Dart’s lack thereof) highlight how quickly Frimbo’s ancestral pretensions can wither into stereotype—a “cartoon,” as it were, that dispels African enchantment—when reiterated in less diplomatic terms. Could it be that the desire for an untrammeled past, an uncontaminated heritage, a coherent community and a clear-cut history are, as the name Malindo suggests, a disease whose remedy is its own form: the bad blues?

RETURN OF THE CONJURE-MAN

Once the subject is provided with its “true” predicate, everything falls into place, the sentence can end.

—ROLAND BARThES, S/Z
On the back of a letter dated 1924, Rudolph Fisher scrawled a definition of “The Realist”: He “combats his black audience” and his “white audience” as well as “what has already been written,” acting under the single “conviction that the truth shall make us free, with ruthless reverence for reality.” Rather than obliterate a “white-authored” detective fiction—which, during the genre’s golden age was precisely enlivened by cross-racial exchange and enthralled by foreign accents that called into questions the notion of racial pedigree—The Conjure-Man Dies takes the detective fiction formula as an expressive mode, a vernacular that can convey the varieties of “blackness” in Fisher’s “Dark Harlem.” Certainly Fisher parts ways with some of the recognizable “vocables” of the genre formula, handling the puzzle mystery as something like a foreign language in its own right as he sketches the modern metropolis. But this is a reciprocal interpolation; in lieu of offering a “proper” image of black life, Fisher deconstructs communal fantasy while destabilizing the puzzle mystery. His “ruthless reverence for reality” risks an antagonistic relationship with a black audience and a white audience whose appeasement was never in the cards. Instead, Fisher exploits and unpacks the sociopolitical imaginary of the locked-room puzzle in a work of literary sociology that hardwires the elimination of that sagacious psychist qua “social technician” N’Gana Frimbo to the materialization of a civil society whose unsociable refrain is, even after the conjure-man’s death, “I’ll be glad when you’re dead, you rascal you.”

In The Conjure-Man Dies, Fisher finally pulls the whodunit out from under the feet of his amateur sleuth: at the moment Archer neatly negotiates the tidy circuitry of puzzle mystery, Frimbo ensnares the attempted assassin Stanley Crouch (alias Easley Jones, the railroad porter) with a live electric switch. But the psychist has not prepared for every eventuality. Crouch has a gun and shoots Frimbo dead, the revelations of classical detective fiction interrupted by the slug out of the hard-boiled. Gosselin points out that the last scene of the book is reserved for the “street-smart,” comic/hard-boiled and self-invented private eye Bubber Brown, “setting the stage” for Chester Himes (617). However, The Conjure-Man Dies doesn’t mark the end of Fisher’s engagement with the detective genre. In fact, his last published story, which appeared in the Metropolitan Magazine shortly after Fisher’s death in December 1934, revives two investigators from this earlier work. “John Archer’s Nose” begins with a phone call that summons Dr. Archer and police detective Dart to the bedside of Sonny Dewey in an apartment on 134th Street—the kind of place where “tenants bring their own locks and
take them when they move”—where they find a young man with a pearl-handled knife in his chest (218). This story is bereft of the musical refrain that is the signature device of Fisher’s first detective fiction, and it surrenders Bubber Brown and Jinx Jenkins, the “comic relief” in *The Conjure-Man Dies* and *The Walls of Jericho*—though Fisher’s unpublished story “One-Month’s Wages” brings back that duo in a moment of fiscal despondency for an exercise in slapstick and black camp. But “John Archer’s Nose” dispenses with the ratiocinative intensity and the cacophony of voices at the core of *The Conjure-Man Dies*. It fully sheds the optimism of classical detective fiction, which by singling out a culprit exonerates a community. These further deviations from the clue-puzzle conventions of *The Conjure-Man Dies* are not merely indicators of Fisher’s hard-boiled bent; “John Archer’s Nose” argues for the inevitability of the hard-boiled, with its narrative implosions and ethical uncertainties.

“John Archer’s Nose” is a crime solved by olfactory instincts, which come into play after Archer notices a peculiar scent in the boy’s room—another scent besides the “discernible—er—fragrance” of alcohol the dead drunk Sonny had “expelled” *before* he was stabbed in his sleep (195). Though Dart humors his colleague, conceding, “I daresay every crime has its peculiar odor,” Archer does not speak in jest: “Old stuff,” he observes, adding, “They used bloodhounds in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*” (194). Dart, who can’t catch a whiff of the scent, nevertheless purports to “smell a rat” and makes Archer out as a bloodhound. This gratuitous punning calls to mind Arthur Conan Doyle’s *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (1902), whose scheming Stapletons (a husband and wife who pretend to be siblings) incite a paranormal scare by coating a mastiff in luminescent phosphorous. This allusion and Fisher’s pointed reference to slavery announce the themes upon which the story hinges: faulty forms of kinship, supernatural hoaxes, and a history of bondage with some bearing on black experience in Harlem. But the stench in Sonny’s room eludes Archer and takes on a life of its own. The physician complains that odors “should be captured, classified and numbered like the lines of the spectrum. We let them run wild” (194). Ineffable and uncataloged, this curious aroma reeks of the occult, or at least its sensory impression has no idiom. Archer remarks, “In a language of a quarter of a million words, we haven’t a single specific direct denotation of a smell” (194). The physician’s compulsive pursuit of this particular scent also alters the dynamics of detection, breaking away from the hard-and-fast logic of “denotation” to something less precise, an undertone or instinct that informs Archer’s activities.
Additionally, Fisher’s incessant reprisal of this gag draws our attention to the homophonic echoes in the title of the mystery, which seems to evoke three registers of interpretation at once. First, as I suggested above, it explicitly instantiates Archer as the detective-protagonist of Fisher’s tale—as opposed to the actual police detective, Perry Dart. Archer is not only a sleuth who doggedly tracks a scent, however. The physician is also a man who “knows” his Harlemites, perhaps because he can see and think “black,” has acquired the “pigmentation of the brain” Fisher attributed to himself. By contrast, *The Conjure-Man Dies* informs us that Dart, who “having himself grown up with the black colony, knew Harlem from lowest dive to loftiest temple,” nevertheless operated according to the sensible conventions of ordinary police detection; “the somber hue of his integument in no wise reflected the complexion of his brain, which was bright, alert, and practical within such territory as it embraced” (14).

Yet Archer and Dart remain colleagues in crime-solving and also close friends. They are “complementary” (185)—a promising alternative to the dysfunctional relations between their probable namesakes, detectives Miles Archer and Sam Spade in Dashiell Hammett’s *The Maltese Falcon* (1930). (Spade, of course, is romancing his partner’s unbearable spouse at the very moment Archer is shot dead by Miss Waverly.) Archer and Dart practice the bachelor banter of an early Holmes and Watson, though their tête-à-têtes in “John Archer’s Nose” are chock-full of trivial witticisms and language play. In stark contrast to the repartee of a Bubber Brown and Jinx Jenkins, though, this picture of male friendship sometimes relies on perverse, unpleasant one-liners: at the murder scene itself, for instance, or anticipating the seduction of Petal Dewey, Sonny’s sister who arrives at Archer’s flat in a pathetic attempt to purloin the murder weapon and protect her family. Their indecorous jokes border on graveyard humor and often fall quite flat, but they also function as a cynical or even misanthropic metacommentary on the state of affairs in Harlem. Or it could be that they are the only defensive mechanism that wards off the truly demoralizing conditions Archer confronts on a daily basis, even if the physician is not capable of the detachment that allows Dart to say, “*Your folks . . . are the most superstitious idiots on the face of the earth*” (185, italics mine). Archer hasn’t got the heart to argue, having witnessed a young boy die of convulsions earlier that day, precisely because the child’s father rejected “new-fangled” X-ray treatments in favor of a charm acquired from a conjure-woman—“a wad of human hair, fried, if you please, in snake oil”—which was in an “evil-smelling packet” around the boy’s neck (186–87).
This bleak reality brings us to a final sense of the title: its evocation of denial and nay-saying (noes), for this work is suffused with a deep pessimism about urban life and with Archer’s despair at the diffuse threat and general malaise that Perry Dart first classifies as “superstition.” The triumph of the irrational and the misguided violence it elicits, prefigured in *The Conjure-Man Dies*, is the subject of this story’s lamentations, and without the levity of the “low” exploits and rich humor that characterized that earlier detective fiction. McCluskey observes that Fisher’s writing takes “seriously an element of traditional experience used more often than not in American fiction for comic effort,” but that the scientific-minded author used his detective fictions to critique the “survivalism of rural life, which can be regressive and tragic” (McCluskey 29–30). Having played the helpless eyewitness to a child “literally choking to death in a fit,” Archer staunchly resolves to identify the source of that peculiar smell in Sonny’s room (186). He insists, “I’m going to locate that odor if it asphyxiates me” (213). But we cannot dismiss the possibility that Archer’s fixation on conjuration, and the “habit of heckling” that helps him to “dismiss an unpleasant memory,” are not themselves the symptoms of self-delusion and denial (187). For if Archer proposes that “Superstition” is the perpetrator that compels him to act the pallbearer as much as the physician, Fisher shows us an image of Harlem distressed by much more than faith in the occult.

Where *The Conjure-Man Dies* introduces its reader to “bright-lighted gaiety of Harlem’s Seventh Avenue” and “the frequent uplifting of merry voices in the moment’s most popular songs,” Fisher’s picture of the Dewey apartment on 134th Street is uglier and bleaker (3). The only window in Sonny’s room looks out onto “the darkness of an airshaft”; when Archer and Dart peer beyond it, they perceive “an occasional lighted window and a blend of diverse sounds welling up: a baby wailing, someone coughing spasmodically, a radio rasping labored jazz, a woman’s laugh, quickly stifled” (190). The rough sounds and silences that punctuate the dark space of the airshaft comprise a terse essay on urban malaise. Its somber vortex sucks up the soundscape of the many in this corner of the metropolis, and the Dewey household, otherwise closed off from all others, appears an entity unto itself. There is no locked-room puzzle here; Archer and Dart painstakingly examine the flat for “some out-of-the-way corner” or a secret hiding place where the murderer might have concealed himself, but conclude upon inspection that the apartment “possessed no apparent entrance or exit other than its one outside door, and there was nothing unusual about an ar-
rangement of rooms” (194). Murder, under these circumstances, is a family matter, since each member of the Dewey family, as well as their tenant Red Brown, had ample opportunity to stick a knife into Sonny. Establishing a motive, by contrast, proves more difficult. Though Red Brown, who boards with the family, insinuates that “Ben figured there was somethin’ goin’ on between Sonny” and Ben’s wife Letty, the Dewey family is remarkably mute on the subject (198). Whereas Archer imagines a dozen plausible assassins for N’Gana Frimbo, he finds it more difficult to assign a credible motive to a member of the Dewey family. Still, the physician and the police detective cannot envision an alternative. Urging the Dewey family to turn in the perpetrator, Dart advises, “I should rather expect a flood of accusations . . . unless you are protecting each other” (193).

In contrast to Christie’s *Murder on the Orient Express*, where each affiliate of the Armstrong household provided an airtight alibi for another, the force of communal bonds in the Dewey family leads each of its members to turn on himself. Petal delivers Ben’s declaration of guilt, warning Dr. Archer that her brother will assault him if he doesn’t turn over the murder weapon. But when Archer refuses to bite, Petal changes her tactics and tries to own up to the crime herself, explaining that she mistook Sonny for Red Brown and had attempted to avenge an assault on her virtue. And after Archer and Dart return to the Dewey apartment the following morning, Ma Dewey takes a crack at a confession, declaring that she murdered her son in a sort of dream state and out of mother love, since she could bear to see him suffer from tuberculosis; he would have perished if he didn’t go to the “cemetery” (215). But none of the family stabbed Sonny, Archer discovers, even if Ma Dewey, a sort of snake-oil salesman, is liable for the chain of events that led to his death. Instead, Fisher reveals that Sonny’s bedroom was accessible from outside. After surveying the premises again, Dr. Archer explains:

> The next apartment is empty. Its entrance is not locked—you know how vacant apartments are hereabouts: the tenants bring their own locks and take them when they move. One room has a window on the same airshaft with Sonny’s at right angles to it, close enough to step across—if you don’t look down. (218)

Any individual might cross over the pitch-dark space of the airshaft to gain access to the Dewey flat, though he would gamble with his own life in the bargain. This provided the point of entry for Solomon Bright, who came
to avenge his clan by murdering each of Ma Dewey’s children as punishment for the snake-oil solution she sold him, which did not rescue his infant from death. The killer lacks the wisdom of King Solomon but would, rather than call, raise the wages of death. “Three for one,” said the doctor. “Rather unfair, isn’t it, Mr. Bright?” (219). Ready to slaughter every one of Ma’s children in retaliation for the death of his own son—who might have been saved by modern medicine, John Archer insists—Bright is moved by an irrational, inexorable need for vengeance, which is why Archer proposes that “Superstition” is the true culprit of this crime.

Fisher’s story ends on this dark note, with the crazed Solomon Bright taken into police custody, and Dart’s initial characterization of Harlemites as “the most superstitious idiots on the face of the earth” yet to be refuted. “Superstition” is made culpable for two deaths in as few days, and buttressed by a treacherous appetite that eviscerates community. Is it easy to forget, then, that before Sonny had a pearl-handled knife in his chest, before “developing bad habits” of drinking and staying out late, his number had already been called? “Tuberculosis both lungs,” the autopsy shows; he was “due to go anyway, sooner or later” (214). It is a familiar tragedy, Ma explains, since Sonny’s father also contracted the disease and “suffered before he went, and look like when I thought ‘bout Sonny goin’ through the same thing I couldn’ stand it” (216). That it was not superstition, a vestige of rural provincialism, but the urban condition itself that would have claimed Sonny’s life, is the substance of Fisher’s “ruthless reverence for reality.” If The Conjure-Man Dies is a crime without a corpse, “John Archer’s Nose” is, Solomon Bright notwithstanding, a crime without a proper culprit. Its solution is without justice, or at least it reeks of the hard-boiled since the elucidation of a single crime in a ravaged system of social relations can only be, as Stefano Tani writes of Hammett’s Red Harvest, “ambiguous and partially unfulfilling” (24). In the cheerless Harlem of “John Archer’s Nose,” urban contagion and death signal a breakdown in interpersonal relations; they are the symptoms—the substance, too—of the moral contamination of urban existence and an indifferent state.

In The Conjure-Man Dies, John Archer proposes to write a murder mystery “that will baffle and astound the world,” precisely because “the murderer will turn out to be the most likely suspect” (154). A medical examiner respectfully responds, “You’d never write another” (155). Perhaps “John Archer’s Nose” is that story, since it seethes with a cynicism about an urban epidemic that
knows no locked rooms and whose only articulated remedy is “the cemeterium.” If Fisher’s first detective fiction foregrounds an interracial American modernist aesthetic, improvising on the generic edifice of the locked-room mystery to explore the stakes of sociability in “Dark Harlem,” Fisher’s last published detective story resembles something like a “hidden object” case, as both its amateur sleuth and actual detective are either stymied or tongue-tied against a lethal urban ecology in Depression-era Harlem—what is endlessly in front of Dr. Archer’s nose. Like the street or city names that stretch from one end of a map to the other in the game August Dupin describes in “The Purloined Letter,” systemic privation can “escape observation by dint of being excessively obvious” (262). In such cases “the physical oversight,” Dupin explains, “is precisely analogous with the moral inapprehension by which the intellect suffers to pass unnoticed those considerations that are too obtrusively and too palpably self-evident” (262). Though an indictment lurks beneath the surface and lingers in the interstices of Fisher’s last detective story, however, its hard-boiled tendencies need not be read as resignation. Is this Fisher’s call, instead, for a leap of sociability—a “pigmentation of the brain,” perhaps?—that reads between the lines? Fisher optimistically imagined something like this in his 1927 essay “The Caucasian Storms Harlem” when he mused, “Maybe these Nordics at last have tuned into our wavelength. Maybe they are at last learning to speak our language” (City of Refuge 82).