

**WASHING, MOPPING AND SNOOPING:
EVERYDAY PRACTICE AND DETECTION IN THE *BLANCHE WHITE
MYSTERIES* SERIES**

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RESUMO: Baseado na teoria de Michel de Certeau sobre práticas cotidianas, este ensaio objetiva discutir como as atividades cotidianas das pessoas comuns podem constituir-se em meios de resistência das culturas subalternas ao poder dominante, na série *Blanche White Mysteries* da escritora afro-americana Barbara Neely. Seguindo o caminho já estabelecido por *Miss Marple* de Agatha Christie, a orotagonista Blanche White investiga crimes sem alterar sua rotina diária como faxineira – a rotina torna-se o próprio espaço de investigação. O apagamento de Blanche na sociedade permite que ela faça sua investigação, beneficiando-se de sua posição marginal para questionar as regras e regulamentos aos quais ela só aparentemente se submete.

PALAVRAS CHAVES: práticas cotidianas; literatura afro-americana contemporânea; ficção policial

ABSTRACT: Based on Michel de Certeau's theory on everyday practices, this essay aims to discuss how the daily activities of the common person may constitute a means of resistance of subaltern cultures to the dominant power in contemporary African American writer Barbara Neely's *Blanche White Mysteries* series. Following the path once established by Agatha Christie's *Miss Marple*, the protagonist Blanche White investigates crimes without altering her daily routine as a cleaning lady – routine becomes the space of investigation itself. Blanche's effacement in society allows her to carry out her investigation, availing herself of her marginal position to question the rules and regulations to which she only apparently submits.

KEY WORDS: everyday practices; contemporary African American literature; detective fiction

A tactic is an art of the weak.
Michel de Certeau
(Certeau, 1988, 37)

In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau studies the daily practices of the common man, activities such as walking, talking and cooking, among others – the silent History that is usually laid aside by mainstream History. His purpose is to analyze daily activities as a means of opposing resistance to dominant sociocultural practices.

Certeau distinguishes the arts of “making do” between strategies and tactics (Certeau, 1988, 29-30). He defines strategies as a manipulation of the power relations that enable the establishment of their own *locus* of power. Tactics, on the other hand, are the actions determined exactly by the absence of power, that can only exist in relation to and in the place of the Other, taking advantage of the circumstances to reach any

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possibility of gain. They are Other ways of making do, which bring new meaning to pre-established codes and that, through wit and deception, re-signify these practices. Whereas strategies are supported by power, tactics aim at resisting this same power. Thus, according to Certeau, “a tactic is an art of the weak” (Certeau, 1988, 37).

Tactics are ways of making do that work as a different culture inside the dominant culture. Although they appear to conform to what is imposed by power, this conformity lies only on the surface, is no more than a façade. They are, for example, the uses of the language that differ from the standard language, as well as the different ways of observing a religion.

Departing from the assumption that everyday practices may constitute a means of resistance of the subaltern cultures to the dominant power, their presence in the literature produced in the periphery of the hegemonic center acquires a new value. They have a political purpose, and constitute a tactic through which marginalized communities there represented seek reappropriation of a cultural, political and socioeconomical space, acquiring new meanings in the confrontation between the center of power and the periphery.

In this essay, we have chosen to work with the everyday practice of taking care of a household and family in the detective series *Blanche White Mysteries*, by African American writer Barbara Neely, discussing how its presence in the novels constitutes a tactic that aims at resisting the hegemonic power.

All the tools for a good cleaning

I haven't created anything whatsoever... just made the faces black.
Chester Himes
(Jablon, 1996, 26)

Making the faces black – that was the technique deployed by Chester Himes, pioneer of black detective fiction in the United States, according to himself, in an interview given to John A. Williams (Jablon, 1996, 26). His role models were Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler, who had already established the tradition of the *roman noir* in the 20s and 30s, with the emblematic hardboiled detectives Sam Spade and Philip Marlowe. The black faces created by Himes were those of Grave Digger and Coffin Ed, the Harlem detectives that are portrayed in most of his work.

However, the idea that his creation was not innovative is arguable. According to Madelyn Jablon, even if Himes saw his work as imitation, his readers insisted on the originality of his production (Jablon, 1996, 26).

The formulas of detective fiction have, through constant repetition, already become a classic of hegemonic literature. Black detective fiction, despite adopting several of the genre's mechanisms, alters and adapts these formulas in its own way, to reach its own goals. “Making the faces black”, then, implies more than just changing a detail when copying the original – it implies a refusal to follow the ready-made formula presented by white literature.

Imitation was considered by Zora Neale Hurston one of the basic characteristics of African American expression. It is important, however, to remember that the term “imitation”, according to African American scholars as Henry Louis Gates Jr. and

Hurston herself, must be understood as a way of Signifying that is different from the white original. According to Gates:

Repetition and revision are fundamental to black artistic forms, from painting and sculpture to music and language use. I have decided to analyze the nature and function of Signifyin(g) precisely because it **is** repetition and revision, or repetition with a difference. (Gates, 1988, xxiv; original emphasis)

This difference constituted the basis for the study of the specific characteristics of African American detective fiction developed by Stephen Soitos, who correlates black writing and the blues – a way of Signifying, for its repetitive structure, suggesting a dialogue with previous composers and/or interpreters (in the same way as jazz improvisations). Considering that detective fiction was born and consolidated as a genre connected to the dominant order and the maintenance of the *status quo*, that is, to the white bourgeoisie, the simple act of making the faces black meant operating changes in the genre, to the extent that, according to Soitos, “their blackness is an integral ingredient for the success of the investigation” (Soitos, 1996, 29). Besides, Soitos points out that the black detective shares a sense of community and family that does not exist, for example, in traditional hardboiled detective fiction, as the hardboiled detective’s lifestyle, beliefs and personal bonds range from sketched to non-existent.

Rather than focusing simply on the crime and capture of the suspect, the blues detectives are interested in the social and political atmosphere, often to the exclusion of detection. This social and political atmosphere is inscribed by racial prejudice. The blues detective recognizes his or her own blackness as well as what blackness means to the characters in the text. The blues detective knows what it means to be an African American, or [...] learns what it means to become one. (Soitos, 1996, 31)

In the words of W.E.B. DuBois:

[T]he Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,— a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (DuBois, 1903)

Although double consciousness, in its original sense, suggests a fragmented view of the world for the black people, it also acknowledges the existence of a dynamic interaction between the black community and the world around it. Soitos remarks that

[t]hrough the application of double consciousness to the detective persona, I further extend the connection between the trickster trope and black detection. All of the detectives in this study are black, and all of them are double-consciously aware of their blackness in relation to white society. By using the

trickster qualities of masking, they make their detection work and in the process outwit their enemies in trickster fashion. (Soitos, 1996, 35)

The references to black vernaculars intermingled in African American detective fiction make up what Soitos names a blackground, composed by all the aspects of African American culture that have helped define its singularity. They emphasize the importance of African American culture in these texts, for example, through the constant references to blues and jazz, as the vernacular that represents all the special qualities of African American creations (Soitos, 1996, 37).

Decades after the appearing of *Grave Digger* and *Coffin Ed*, Chester Himes' detectives, detective fiction in the United States counts on several other representatives of African American origin. Among the best known are *Easy Rawlins*, by Walter Mosley; *Tamara Hayle*, by Valerie Wilson Wesley; and the character who constitutes the object of study of this essay: cleaning lady / detective *Blanche White*, by Barbara Neely.

In 1992, Barbara Neely publishes the novel *Blanche on the Lam*, the first adventure of the African American detective ironically named *Blanche White*. The *Blanche White Mysteries* series encompasses four novels so far: following *Blanche on the Lam*, Neely published *Blanche Among the Talented Tenth* (1994), *Blanche Cleans Up* (1998) and *Blanche Passes Go* (2000). The name of the protagonist, whose effects on the other characters (and on the reader!) range from slight constraints to roaring laughter, makes it plain that this is not an unbiased detective series. In christening her black protagonist with a name that means white twice, Barbara Neely draws the attention of the reader to the issues of color and race interspersed in the series plot, and ends up subverting the isolated meaning of each name. Considering the addition of the names, we have a formula in which adding negative plus negative brings a positive result, that is, *Blanche* nullifies *White* and vice-versa.

Blanche is an overweight single black woman in her mid-thirties, who has chosen to make a living as an independent cleaning lady, and is tired of the racism of the white people who "seemed to think she ought to be delighted to swab their toilets and trash cans for a pittance" (Cary, 2004). At first sight, it seems tempting to consider her a *Miss Marple*, the unforgettable detective created by Agatha Christie – they are both single, decidedly curious and snoop, and take charge of the task of solving the mysteries that disturb their apparently peaceful lives. Both *Blanche* and *Miss Marple* remain faithful to their condition of amateur detectives, and never become professional; both, however, eventually accept using their investigative skills to help friends in need. Would Barbara Neely then just have "made the faces black"? A second look, however, shows that the similarities between *Miss Marple* and *Blanche* are restricted to their marital status and the capacity to solve mysteries that seem to hit their lives at a far from normal rate... *Blanche* is an independent woman, who earns her living through her own work, and who has chosen to remain single. She states her freedom to choose through the long relationship she keeps with Leo, who her family and friends consider to be the perfect match for her, but who she refuses to marry; also, after the death of her sister, *Blanche* builds a bond of familial responsibility distinct from the traditional bourgeois representations of single detectives, when she takes up the responsibility for raising her nephew and niece as if they were her own children. *Blanche* is described by her creator

as a “poor, working-class black woman who has to deal with whatever life puts in her way, including dead bodies” (Cary, 2004).

Blanche’s adventures are narrated against a background that represents and re-reads African American history and culture, so that detective fiction mingles with historical narrative and ethnography. The choice of detective fiction is deliberate and conscious, related to its popularity, and enables the writer to discuss political and social issues connected to the history of the black community in the United States – slavery, the Civil Rights Movement, racial conflicts and so on. According to Kimberly Dilley (1998), Barbara Neely uses the element of mystery to engage the reader in matters that he/she would not necessarily read otherwise. For example, in the passage below, Blanche cites several historical characters of the Civil Rights Movement, which could lead the less informed reader to search for more knowledge on the topic:

She remembered the wanted posters for Joanne Little, Angela Davis, and Assata Shakur. She blushed at putting herself in such important company, then wondered if the sheriff’s office appreciated the distinction. (Neely, 1992, 43)

Andrew Pepper, in his study about the contemporary American crime novel (2000), advises of the dangers of reductionism in analyzing black female detective fiction. According to him, there is a tendency to privilege the issues of race and/or gender instead of promoting a thorough investigation of how the change in the narrative perspective – from that of the hegemonic perspective of the male white detective to that of the black female detective – affects the structural configuration and the thematic interests of the genre. This is the point of view that informs the argument proposed by this essay.

In the novel *Blanche on the lam* (1992), Blanche’s domestic chores take up a role that is quite different from what would usually be expected, which would be to provide support for herself and her late sister’s children, who she raises as her own. In an absolutely surprising first scene, Barbara Neely seems to place Blanche in the space that black people often occupy in white literature: the other side of the law, that is, the defendant’s bench. It is common that literature produced by a given ethnic community targets its own members; therefore, the setting of a court where the title character is being tried for supposedly having given some bad checks does not seem coherent with the proposition of narrating the adventures of a black detective, and causes some strangeness in the reader. Soon we conclude, however, that the scene fulfills the purpose of showing how the judicial system of the United States is biased in relation to the black community, often associated to criminality. In the following lines, Blanche tries to argue that she could not honor the checks because her (white) employers left town without paying her salary, but that she has the money to pay off her debt and the corresponding fine – that is, the dishonesty of the white employers is put against the black maid’s honesty. The judge, however, hardly listens to her explanation, and sentences her to thirty days in jail. Scared at the perspective, and worried about her children’s support, Blanche makes the best of a disorder in the courtroom to escape.

Her next step is then to find refuge as a temporary maid at a rich family’s household, expecting to lead a simple and discreet life until she is able to clarify the situation. The disguise at Blanche’s disposal is the stereotyped image of the position she occupies in society: the black domestic worker. As she puts on her uniform and takes up

the tools necessary to do her chores, Blanche becomes “invisible in plain sight” (Hathaway, 2005, 320), enjoying total freedom to explore an environment that does not recognize the person Blanche or her individuality, but only the function she performs.

As a domestic worker, Blanche considers that “reading people and signs, and sizing up situations, were as much a part of her work as scrubbing floors and making beds” (Neely, 1992, 3). Her investigative work begins when she finds herself in the imminence of becoming a suspect in a case of murder; she tries, then, to solve the mystery by means of her intelligence, her knowledge of human nature and her common sense – means usually deployed by amateur detectives – besides an extensive network of information formed by friends and acquaintances who work in other households.

This information network also plays the role of protecting the detective throughout her investigation. As opposed to the hardboiled detective, who is usually alone and does not have an immediate family to worry about, the amateur detective needs to pay attention to the risk at which she puts her own family as she decides to investigate the crime. The amateur detective has multiple roles – besides being a detective, she is a friend, a mother, a wife – but none of these roles defines her by itself; each role is only one among others. To her, the investigation does not represent her personal or professional identity, but a necessity, be it to defend herself, a friend or a family member. Still, many times the role of the detective conflicts with the protective role that a woman traditionally performs in the family, which, according to the bourgeois tradition, would be her primeval role. Her obligations to the community and other instances of the public sphere would only come in second place.

According to Kimberly Dilley, the female detective, professional or amateur, does not constitute a figure of authority as the man, who is part of the dominant order and determines the solutions for the cases in which the order is broken (Dilley, 1998, 124). In the novels by female writers, many times a single view of reality is not accepted – there is not a privileged voice, which symbolizes the truth. However, although the white female detective is in search of space for the feminine amidst the masculine ideology, she is still part of the dominant ideology, which is white. The white detective protests only against the gender stereotypes, against the secondary position to which women are pushed in a society dominated by men. In the case of a detective like Blanche, this situation is aggravated, because exclusion is multiplied by three. Besides the issues related to gender, it is also necessary to analyze the issues related to the character’s race and social class – after all, Blanche is not only a woman, she is black and poor.

Black women in the United States are subject to stereotypes of historical origin, which date back to the time of slavery. Such stereotypes are based on figures like the Mammy, for example, the slave responsible for taking care of the white children, offering food, comfort and affection. Although the Mammy is a symbol of strength, resistance and self-confidence, accepted even by the black community itself (Schiller, 2005, 23-24), Blanche refuses the label, just as she refuses the secondary role performed by the blacks in the white society. On the contrary, she perceives that she can use the Mammy stereotype as a disguise, and that Signifyin(g) on this stereotype may strengthen her, as Hathaway points out:

Neely’s Blanche instead appears to “stay in her class” by doing her employers’ bidding, while carrying out her own subversive agenda beneath the surface.

Because no one Blanche is “investigating” knows that she is being transgressive, or even thinks her capable of such complexity, what she can gain by doing so is increased exponentially. (Hathaway, 2005, 325)

An example of the strengthening by means of Signifyin(g) on the stereotype is the episode in which Blanche deliberately imitates the gestures of Butterfly McQueen in the film “Gone With the Wind”:

“Oh, Lord!” Blanche lifted her apron to her face as she’d seen Butterfly McQueen do in *Gone with the Wind*. If the subject had been anything other than Nate’s death, she’d have had a hard time keeping a straight face. It was the kind of put-on that gave her particular pleasure. But now she only wanted to appear convincingly simple. She rubbed her eyes to moisten and redden them, and raised her head to regard her enemy’s helpmate. (Neely, 1992, 153-154)

Still according to Hathaway, cooking and cleaning are, for Blanche, activities that signify not only her means to survive, but also a way to conquer freedom and independence, both from her employers and from her pursuers – “she exists within the constraints of her job and battles against those constraints through the work itself” (Hathaway, 2005, 326). These activities, then, acquire a new value as they function as tactics, granting Blanche a power not traditionally associated to the domestic worker.

In Blanche’s point of view, being a temporary maid may have its disadvantages, but it gives her autonomy and independence, besides stopping her from working long enough to the same family so as to get involved with her employers or to start worrying about them. Blanche sees any worry and/or concern for the whites as a symptom of the disease that she names “Darkies’ disease”, and that works as an instrument of psychological domination. The “disease” is manifested when the black workers believe that there is a relation of affection on the part of the white family that employs them and become attached to them, as if they were “part of the family”, creating bonds of tenderness that will hardly be reciprocated. Blanche tells the story of a woman who always took the bus with her:

There was a woman among the regular riders of the bus she often rode home from work who had a serious dose of the disease. Blanche actually cringed when the woman began talking in her bus-inclusive voice about old Mr. Stanley, who said she was more like a daughter to him than his own child, and how little Edna often slipped and called her Mama. That woman and everyone else on the bus knew what would happen to all that close family feeling if she told Mr. Stanley, or little Edna’s mama, that instead of scrubbing the kitchen floor she was going to sit down with a cup of coffee and make some phone calls. (Neely, 1992, 48)

Blanche fights against the symptoms of the Darkies’ disease mainly when she notices that she is particularly fond of Mumsfield, the young white man who has Down’s Syndrome and is the millionaire heir of the family for whom she works. Despite the tenderness she feels, Blanche does not allow herself to let go of the fact that Mumsfield is white – “She didn’t want to shower concern on someone whose ancestors had most likely bought and sold her ancestors as if they were shoes or machines” (Neely, 1992,

182). Still, Blanche is sensitive to the fact that Mumsfield's condition renders him as invisible as, in her case, the color of her skin and her occupation:

She understood that his Down's Syndrome made him as recognizably different from the people who ran and owned the world as she... There was no way she could explain how the last six days had confirmed her constitutional distaste for being any whiteman's mammy... "I understand, Blanche," he'd told her. "I understand." And for two seconds she'd thought that somehow he'd leaped across the gap between them and truly knew what it meant to be a black woman trying to control her own life (...). (Neely, 1992, 214-215)

Although Blanche gives Mumsfield a different status from the one she gives her other white employers, Monika Mueller stresses that her reflection upon the relationships between black workers and white employers points out to the fact that, decades after the Civil Rights Movement, the power structure has not yet been changed. (Mueller, 2003, 123).

Further considerations

We observe that there is a great probability that the tastes and values of the readers for whom Barbara Neely writes ideologically contradict the tastes and values of the great reading public of the United States, aligned with the hegemonic beliefs, values and attitudes of the dominant culture of the country, which is white.

Maureen Reddy shows that there are certain comments about racial issues, distributed throughout the *Blanche White Mysteries* series, that only make sense if they are understood as directed to the white readers, as a way to instruct them about those issues (Reddy, 2003, 66). Some examples of these instruction passages are found in *Blanche among the talented tenth* (1994), the novel in which Neely deals with the difficulties existing between dark-skinned and light-skinned blacks, pointing to the presence of an intraracial prejudice that most whites have no knowledge of. At the very beginning of the novel, when Blanche arrives at Amber Cove, she describes the way Arthur Hill, the manager, reacts to her appearance:

Without a word, he placed his hands on the counter, leaned slightly forward and played his eyes over her luggage, shoes and clothes in a way that said who made her clothes and how well she'd whitefied her hair were major issues for him. In the case of someone as black as her, were her clothes and the condition of her hair even more important to him? **Something** had to compensate. (Neely, 1994, 15-16; original emphasis)

In the passage below, there is another example of how the questions of color permeate the relationships inside the black community itself. Blanche explains why she reacts distrustfully when Stu shows an interest on her:

He was a member of one of those First Black Families. He probably went to private schools and had never seen a cockroach – unless he went south during the civil rights movement. And then there were his looks. He wouldn't be the first light-skinned man who'd thought her blackness meant an automatic trip

to paradise in gratitude for his willingness to screw someone as black as her, was how she thought the reasoning went. (Neely, 1994, 57)

In still another episode, Blanche surprises Veronica, one of the resort's guests, at a drugstore, buying products to straighten her hair. She immediately grabs her purchases and runs, which leads Blanche to wonder if the woman had been that much disturbed by letting a stranger know she straightened her hair because she was trying to pass for white:

The woman snatched her purchases and hurried around the corner. Blanche wondered if she might actually be trying to pass for white.

She tried to imagine having that chance and taking it. She could picture herself a hundred shades lighter with her facial features sharpened up; but she couldn't make up the leap to wanting to step out of the talk, walk, music, food and feeling of being black that the white world often imitated but never really understood. She realized how small a part her complexion played in what it meant to her to be black. (Neely, 1994, 20)

As she ponders upon which of her own characteristics lead her to define herself as black, Blanche starts an argument about the meaning of being white or black, even calling attention to the fact that the white very often imitates the black – in clothes and hairstyle, in the ways of talking and dancing. The imitation of the black by the white also carries a difference, but this difference is not seen as a way of Signifyin(g), but as an incapacity to truly comprehend the implications of being black in contemporary United States.

In contemporary society, being white, black, indian or belonging to any race or ethnicity is a fluid notion that does not obey biological criteria, but political ones. The white person knows he/she is white because he/she is a part of the politically and culturally dominant society, distinct from the others who, from the hegemonic point of view, lose their private identities and are homogenized and accommodated under the rubric "Other". In the texts produced in the periphery of power, however, we see that the white does not occupy a central position, allotted to those who detain the power. Barbara Neely herself offers two very illustrative examples of this question, both taken from *Blanche on the Lam*. In the first example, Blanche notices that she has, in relation to Mumsfield, the same "sixth sense" that lets her know when her mother, her friend Ardell or one of her children approaches:

This thing with him was beyond her Approaching Employer Warning Sense, which alerted her to the slightest rustling or clinking of a nearing employer. This was more like the way she always knew when her mother was around, or Ardell, or which one of the children was about to fling open the door and bound through the house. This ability to sense Mumsfield's approach was of the same nature but different. What made it different was the fact that she didn't know this white boy and didn't appreciate having him on her frequency. (Neely, 1992, 45)

Doris Witt makes a parallel between this fragment of the novel and the passage in which Blanche compares Mumsfield's position in society to the position of the black people, especially of black women (Witt, 2001, 175). Blanche concludes that, because of his Down's Syndrome, Mumsfield is as different, and, therefore, as invisible in the eyes of the hegemonic society as herself and, this way, is "visible to her inner eye and eligible for her concern" (Neely, 1992, 214). Still according to Witt:

Blanche finally justifies her emotional investments in Mumsfield by accepting the empirical reality of his disability and accordingly designating him an honorary black woman. From this perspective, Mumsfield's genetic difference from normative bourgeois white masculinity renders him, paradoxically, invisible just like Blanche and thus deserving of being registered by her "sixth sense". (Witt, 2001, 175)

In granting Mumsfield the title of "honorary black woman", Blanche makes the reader question what it means to be a black woman, and, by extension, what it means to be a woman or a man, black or white.

In the second example, Neely introduces the tactic of reversing the connotation that white is equivalent to positive and black to negative, by Signifyin(g) on the meaning of blackmail:

She thought the sheriff's solution included paying someone off with money he expected to get from Everett for not telling Grace that Everett was fucking around. Blackmail, in a word. Blanche quickly searched the mind for the other word, the one that began with "ex". She tried not to use words that made black sound bad. When she couldn't find the word she wanted, she settled on "whitemale" and was pleased how much more accurately her word described the situation. (Neely, 1992, 122)

In relation to this issue, Monika Mueller points out that Neely reproduces the binary racial opposition between white and black from the point of view of the black person, effectively showing how, in Blanche's case, "whiteness signifies an otherness within the black subject which requires control and mastery" (Mueller, 2003, 125).

We notice, thus, that at the moment when the white is taken out of the center, the sense of authority and hegemony is lost – what would then define the white in this context? According to the line of thought that the white is white because it is not the Other, and at this moment he takes up the place of the Other, excluded and marginalized, it is necessary to proceed to further reflection.

In this sense, Minrose Gwin (1988) makes a pertinent contribution when she states, in her essay about the reading of black women's texts by white women, that if such reading intends to have any meaning it should fold upon itself, in a process of reflection that not only reads its own cultural assumptions, but also looks back at itself as the Other white in the texts produced by blacks. As an addition to this stream of thought, we may also consider pertinent the remarks made by Doris Sommer (1993), when analyzing the testimonial narratives by Rigoberta Menchú, in the first example, and the United States slave narratives, in the second:

Perhaps [her] audible silences and her wordy refusals to talk are calculated not to cut short our curiosity but to incite and then frustrate it, leaving us to feel the access closed off and to wonder at our exclusion. (Sommer, 1993, 144)

These books resist the competent reader, intentionally. By marking off an impassable distance between reader and text, and thereby raising questions of access or welcome, writers [...] practice strategies to produce the kind of readerly incompetence that more reading will not overcome. [...] The issue to be considered is [...] the rhetoric of selective, socially differentiated understanding. Announcing limited access is the point, not whether or not some information is really withheld. (Sommer, 1993, 147)

This “incompetence” that Sommer refers to would be the result achieved by the novels we dealt with in this essay, by allowing this “selective understanding” and “announcing limited access”.

In the novels considered in this essay, everyday practices take up a fundamental role as a means of resistance from the studied cultures to the dominant power; they constitute tactics through which these marginalized communities search to reappropriate their spaces in society – in political, social, economical and cultural terms. We conclude that, in these specific novels, daily routine has been converted into a way of re-signifying the invisibility of those who are situated in the margins of hegemonic society. Being invisible, for the detective we consider here, is a powerful working tool, which allows the good progress of the investigation. Everyday activities constitute the very space of investigation, where the detective searches for clues that will allow the solution of the mysteries, which is only possible if they may go by unnoticed. Thus, invisibility leads to a greater access to power – taking advantage of the marginal position she occupies, our detective may question a society to whose rules and norms she only apparently submits.

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