https://doi.org/10.48751/CAM-2024-22359

cadernos do arquivo municipal

CÂMARA MUNICIPAL DE LISBOA

ISSN 2183-3176 | 2ª Série Nº 22 (2024), e202416

Dossier

Noir in the 1980s and 1990s: Decolonizing ideologies

Literatura *noir* nas décadas de 1980 e 1990: Ideologias descolonizantes

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses the growth of *noir* in France and the United States of America (USA) in the 1980s and 1990s. Under its various forms such as the *polar*, the sub-genre embraces a leftist agenda, aiming at exploring the rise of domestic issues such as race, gender discrimination, and poverty to expose the dark side of neoliberalism and its ideologies of equality, prosperity, and justice. A decolonial reading of Didier Daeninckx's *Meurtres pour mémoire* (1983), Daniel Pennac's *La petite marchande de prose* (1989), and Walter Mosley's *Black Betty* (1994) demonstrates how the process of narration and a conscious focus on "decent people" threaten ideologies of nation building, consumerism, and gender/racial equality. Through the works of Walter Mignolo and Achille Mbembé, we aim to show how neoliberal capitalism follows the same pattern of appropriation of resources and bodies that has been in place since the Industrial Revolution. A pattern deconstructed by *noir* writers with the aim of promoting more humanity.

KEYWORDS

Noir; Neoliberalism; Decoloniality; Narration; Race

RESUMO

Este artigo discute o crescimento da literatura *noir* em França e nos Estados Unidos da América nas décadas de 1980 e 1990. Sob as suas diversas formas, como a *polar*, o subgénero abraça uma agenda esquerdista, com o objetivo de explorar a ascensão de questões internas como raça, discriminação de género e pobreza, para expor o lado negro do neoliberalismo e as suas ideologias de igualdade, prosperidade e justiça. Uma leitura descolonizante de *Meurtres pour mémoire* (1983) de Didier Daeninckx, *La petite marchande de prose* (1989) de Daniel Pennac, e *Black Betty* (1994) de Walter Mosley, demonstra como o processo de narração e o foco consciente nas "pessoas decentes" ameaçam as ideologias de construção da nação, consumismo e igualdade de género/raça. Através das obras de Walter Mignolo e Achille Mbembé, pretendemos mostrar como o capitalismo neoliberal segue o mesmo padrão de apropriação de recursos e corpos existente desde a Revolução Industrial. Um padrão desconstruído pelos escritores *noir* com o objetivo de promover mais humanidade.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Literatura *noir*; Neoliberalismo; Descolonização; Narração; Raça

INTRODUCTION

In 1997, the literary journal *Les temps modernes* published a special dossier on *noir* fiction[1] during the Mitterand years[2] from 1981 to 1995[3]. The review evaluates the growth of *noir* as a means to examine the failures of the socialist presidency. Such failures include the rise of unemployment around the late 1980s, as well as the renouncement of socialist policies and the expansion of consumer culture in France. Jean Pons, the editor of the dossier and his fellow writers all agree that the Mitterrand years did not meet the expectations of those who voted for social change. On the contrary, the economic crises of the 1980s and the numerous scandals during Mitterand's presidency[4] reinforced the writers' distrust of the political class, a contempt clearly reflected in the fiction produced during those years. In his foreword, Pons explains the role played by *noir* fiction in bursting the bubble of optimism built by politics and in resuscitating reality as a tool to deconstruct failing policies. Pointing out that *noir* fiction is perceived in literary circles as paraliterature because of its popular dimension and its attachment to the masses, Pons advocates for a fiction that embraces social determinism, one that will expose the failures of liberal politics and further manifest its difference in the literary world. According to Pons, *noir* embraces reality to raise socio-political concerns, with the aim of painting a society in which everything is rigged right from the beginning:

> Dans les romans noirs, il ne s'agit pas seulement de résoudre une énigme, de trouver l'auteur du crime et de mettre à jour ses mobiles, il s'agit de comprendre, en dépassant la sphère individuelle, les dérapages, les incidents de parcours, à l'intérieur des déterminations sociales qui pèsent comme une fatalité et qui sont la forme moderne du destin (Pons, 1997, p. 7).

Noir fiction relies on individual stories to speak to the community at large; it makes use of stories and research to expose the difference between the "have"s and the "have not"s; it relies on the masses to advocate for greater justice and equality. In *noir,* the world, not the individual, should be judged and criticized. This is essentially the opinion that French writer Dominique Manotti espouses: "Ce n'est plus l'individu seul qui est criminel, c'est le monde de souffrance, de misère, de violence et de corruption dans lequel nous vivons qui produit les individus criminels, ce monde que la loi et la justice recouvrent, sans l'organiser"[5] (Manotti, 2007, p. 107). Manotti advocates for a genre that subverts the perception of crime, and redefines the reader's perception of crime by insisting on its socio-political dimension. Thus, *noir* aims at decolonizing the social meaning of crime.

Crime constitutes the cornerstone of detective fiction in general. In his essay *Typologie du roman policier* (1978), Tzvetan Todorov outlines the binary opposition between the detective, protector of social order, and the criminal, destroyer of social peace and harmony. Todorov (1978) argues that crime fiction perpetuates the image of the stable, Western liberal society that is sometimes threatened by suspect behavior. It reflects the epistemic stability of the West through the figure of the detective. *Noir,* on the contrary, aims at decolonizing crime fiction by exposing the inherent "civilization of death hidden under the rhetoric of modernization and prosperity, of the improvement of modern institutions" (Mignolo, 2018, p. 161). In short, it is the cruelty of the Western ideo-

[1] *Noir* or *polar* designates a sub-genre of crime fiction, born in France in 1945 and inaugurated by Léo Malet's first novel, *120, rue de la gare* (1943). The genre draws its inspiration from the American hardboiled novel, another sub-genre born in the 1920s in the USA with authors like Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammett. Both genres explore crime as a representation of social decay and the extremes of urbanization. However, *noir* adopts a more political tone, as Malet's novel was a critique of German occupation during World War II.

[2] François Mitterrand was the first socialist French president from 1981 to 1995.

[3] See: *Les temps modernes* (Num. 595, 1997).

[4] Such scandals include the Angolagate, the sale of weapons by the French government to the Movimento Popular pela Libertação de Angola (MPLA), a left-wing political party in Angola, during the Angolan Civil War (1975-2002); or the Tapie case in 1992, the illegal sale of the then French company Adidas to Credit Lyonnais by Bernard Tapie, minister for Urban Affairs.

[5] Personal translations will be provided in this article. Unless otherwise stated, all translations are the author's own.

Translation: The individual is not the only culprit, the world of sufferings, and misery, and violence, and corruption we live in that produces criminals, this world that law and justice cover, without organizing it.

logies of democracies and the hypocrisy of human rights that *noir* writers are attracted to. Instead of triggering the investigation and placing the detective at the center of the narrative structure, crime opens a window in a world onto which social norms are questioned. In Léo Malet's novel *120, rue de la gare* (1943), the first *noir* novel published in France, the detective and protagonist Nestor Burma investigates his friend's murder and uncovers corruption within the Vichy police. Malet's novel builds on crime to criticize the German occupation and French collaboration. This political anchoring, the dedication to questioning contemporary democracies through an accurate observation of social issues, motivates the leftist/Marxist orientation of *noir.*

This article attempts to examine how *noir* decolonizes ideologies of human rights, democracy, and freedom. As discussed previously, *noir* deconstructs the Manichean balance between good and evil, detective and criminal, established by traditional writers such as Arthur Conan Doyle. In fact, the *polar* breeds on its marginal position in the literary field to create an atmosphere of violence that suits its criticism of contemporary democracies. This article will demonstrate how *noir* exposes the inherent cruelty of Western democracies towards their populations and their inability to face their own frailties, advocating for a decolonial vision that criticizes forgetfulness, racism, and cruelty. The works selected in this research will include three novels published in the 1980s and 1990s, a key period in the rise of a leftist and social justice oriented agenda. The first is Didier Daeninckx's *Meurtres pour mémoire* (1983), a novel that explores the memory of the Algerian War of Independence. Second, Daniel Pennac's *La petite marchande de prose* (1989) discusses the ills caused by consumer consumption. Finally, Walter Mosley's *Black Betty* (1994) brings forward the issue of domestic violence, denouncing the impact patriarchy still plays in contemporary communities.

NOIR AS DECOLONIZING

Mignolo's concern for decolonizing and exposing the inherent cruelty of modernity echoes Achille Mbembé's concept of necropolitics, as both concepts focus on the other side of modernity, its inherent cruelty especially in the Third World. The Cameroonian thinker opposes Michel's Foucault's (2004) vision of biopolitics[6]. He argues that biopolitics is a proponent of sovereignty and reason and posits that the main mark of sovereignty lies in the state's capacity to kill its citizens. Sovereignty, thus reasoned, he argues, "is to exert one's control over mortality and define life as the deployment and manifestation of power" (Mbembé, 2019, p. 71). If Foucault sees power as the perpetuation of individual liberties, and the expansion of free trade and economic growth, Mbembé centers on the power to kill. Thus, the necropolis is a dystopian universe that deprives the individual of three basic rights: the right to housing, the right to protect themselves, and civil rights. In *Cruel modernity* (2013), Jean Franco describes the necropolis as plantations in Africa in which colonized people are treated like slaves, brutalized, and killed. The image of the plantation perpetuates not only the heritage of racism and colonization, but it also exposes Mbembé's definition of sovereignty as the capacity to kill to enforce laws and as a form of government. Franco uses the image of the plantation and slavery first, to show the extent of biopolitics, thus questioning Western policies and their treatment of non-Western communities, especially in Africa and Latin America, and second, to build the epistemological context in which ideals such as democracy, human rights, and memory will be decolonized.

To decolonize eurocentric epistemology, Walter Mignolo coins the concept of coloniality[7], as an episteme to designate the knowledge, history, and culture of the West, with the purpose of emphasizing the socio-political concerns of the Third World and to deconstruct the North-South dichotomy:

> Coloniality (…) is not a concept that emerged in Europe to account for issues of European concern – its economy, sensibility, history – but a concept created in the Third World, responding to the needs prompted by local histories of

[6] See: Foucault (2004); Franco (2013).

[7] Mignolo borrowed the term from Anibal Quijano's work, *Coloniality of power* (2000).

> coloniality at the very historical moment when the Three World division was collapsing. In Europe, the concerns were on modernity, postmodernity, and globalization, not on coloniality, the darker side of modernity, postmodernity and globalization (Mignolo, 2018, p. 112).

For Mignolo, the fall of the Berlin Wall did not sanction the end of the Manichean struggle between East and West; rather, it also sanctioned the beginning of a global conversation on the Third World. He goes further, arguing that even though coloniality highlights the darker side of modernity, breeding the narratives of decolonization and the struggles for independence and autonomy following the Second World War, coloniality also paved the way for decolonial thinking, which emphasizes marginality and projects Third World narratives onto the critical and political scenes. Coloniality does not only deconstruct the West, but it also sees the oppressed and the oppressors as equals, examining the division between them. It is this second aspect, building a decolonial mindset, a new alternative, to build a new narrative that constitutes the interest of decolonization. By exposing the darker side of modernity, decolonization, through coloniality, attempts to offer an epistemological alternative, one based on humanity and generosity.

To build a coherent alternative requires the deconstruction of Western epistemology and its claims to universality. To expose the ravages of coloniality and place the Third World at the center of global conversations redefining the value of culture and geography, Mignolo points out that Western epistemology adopted a universal vision that relegated non-Western cultures and histories to the margins, creating a void only the civilizing mission could fill:

> Western epistemology (from Christian theology to secular philosophy and science) has pretended that knowledge is independent of the geohistorical (Christian Europe) and biographical conditions (Christian white men living in Christian Europe) in which it is produced. As a result, Europe became the locus of epistemic enunciation, and the rest of the world became the object to be described and studied from the European (and, later on, the United States) perspective (Mignolo, 2011).

Western knowledge and its claims of universality dismantles traditional cultures in the interest of neoliberalism. Ultimately, the colonial project is still present and the critic's duty consists of exploring the manifestations of this new culture of indifference and violence that characterizes modernity. In *Necropolitics* (2019), Mbembé hypothesizes that the right for modern democracies to use violence as a form of punishment has transformed into the right to choose whom to kill. He points out that "the sovereign right of the sword and the mechanisms of biopower are part of the functioning of all modern states; indeed, they can be seen as constitutive elements of state power in modernity" (Mbembé, 2019, p. 71). Taking an example from nazi Germany, Mbembé demonstrates how, under the guise of the political enemy, the nazi regime implemented a series of policies against its own citizens, policies that eventually led to the Holocaust. Beyond the process of dehumanization that characterized the killings of jews by the nazi regime, Mbembé examines the correlation between biopolitics and cruelty. In the case of the Holocaust, the jews are depicted as the enemies of the regime, a rhetoric that justifies their extermination. This Manichean opposition between civilized and uncivilized, friend and enemy, paves the way to an enmity that inevitably fosters the desire to inflict pain and death upon the enemy. Since racism, state-sponsored violence, terrorism become rampant in communities across the world, Mbembé concludes on the necessity to rethink our relationship and perception of the other.

Jean Franco's introduction to *Cruel modernity* follows the same line of thought: "What massacres, rape, and desecration suggest is a meltdown of the fundamental core that makes humans recognize their own vulnerability and hence acknowledge that of the other" (Franco, 2013, p. 6). Behind enmity or racism, or terrorism, lies the individual's inability to appreciate the other as a person. Coloniality examines the essence of human rights. Exposing the darker side of modernity should lead to a critical appraisal of globalization and neoliberalism, and maybe to a rejection of a system of thought that constantly dehumanizes communities for the sake of political or economic interests. The purpose of using coloniality and engaging the process of decolonization is to explore issues such as memory, human rights, and racism to raise much-needed awareness of our shared humanity.

Coloniality's project of exposing modernity's propensity for violence and cruelty adeptly fits the purpose of the subgenres of *noir* and hardboiled[8]. The hardboiled emerged in the 20s and distanced itself from the image of crime as an occasional mishap of disturbed individuals portrayed in traditional crime fiction. Andrew Pepper suggests that the hardboiled shifted from traditional crime, because it investigates the rise of organized crime:

> One of the most significant generic transformations ushered in by the emerging American hard-boiled school of crime writers in the interwar years was a dramatic shift in the perception and representation of crime and its currency as social barometer. Crime was no longer seen as it had been in the 'classic' detective fiction of Christie and Sayers as the product of occasional and atypical tears in the otherwise secure moral fabric of gentle English society, but rather as bastard offspring of an urban-fueled modernity (Pepper, 2000, p. 10).

Novels like Dashiell Hammett's *The maltese falcon* (1930) exposes the ills of urbanity, while engaging a conversation on social determinism. At the same time, such novels pedestalize the detective as the representative of a shaky, yet steady American society, which as it struggles against rampant urbanization, the rise of gangs and drugs, the hardboiled is depicted as a beacon of virtue, whose rationality keeps the values of justice and fairness intact. Susanna Lee considers the hardboiled as the beginning of individual accountability: "the hard-boiled consistently intimated that individual abdication or suspension of accountability is deliberate and is the foundation of social disorder, not its product" (Lee, 2016, p. 5). Lee's conservative approach projects the hardboiled as an instance of coloniality, because it fails to address important social issues such as racism, or the place of women at a time when women's rights and segregation needed to be addressed. Her argument designates the hardboiled detective as the messiah of a community in which social issues could be pushed to the margin.

Even though the sub-genre espouses Western modernity from the beginning, *noir* thus embraces a social, if not socialist style of denunciation. Instead of posing individual responsibility at the center of social change, it engages the community at large. More importantly, *noir* relies on violence and plays witness to the darker side of modernity, building on cruelty to question the foundations of Western epistemology. Despite its marginalized position, *noir* embodies the left's old concern for the masses, their welfare and survival, even though such concerns could sound utopian. Nevertheless, it is the balance between cruelty on one side and hope on the other that constitute *noir*'s credibility:

> Le polar, et avec lui ses auteurs et ses lecteurs, évolue sur une crête séparant l'utopie de la catastrophe : d'un côté l'espoir d'une société meilleure et de l'autre le désespoir suscité par la barbarie du siècle dernier. Son sujet, c'est cette barbarie dont il est le témoin attentif, c'est la mémoire et aussi une pratique politique de gauche[9] (Müller & Ruoff, 2002, p. 10).

It is fair to assume that *noir'*s investigation of reality aims at questioning the contemporary left and neoliberalism. By uncovering barbarism of all kinds, the genre relies on history and facts to evaluate how memory and human rights are handled in contemporary democracies.

[8] Even though *noir* and hardboiled fiction emerged on the literary scene, respectively, in France in the 40s and in the USA in the 20s, I shall rely on David Platten's argument that *noir* is a stylistic transposition of the hardboiled's use of crime to discuss social realism and determinism in America in the 20s and 30s (Platten, 2005, p. 116).

[9] Translation: *Noir,* with its writers and readers evolves at a border between utopia and disaster: on one side, the hope for a better world; on the other, despair resulting from the tragedies of the last century. *Noir*'s subject matter is the cruelty it witnesses, it's its memory and a certain inclination for leftist thinking.

DECOLONIZING MEMORY: DAENINCKX'S *MEURTRES POUR MÉMOIRE*

Didier Daeninckx's most famous novel, *Meurtres pour mémoire* (1983), was published two years after the French newspaper *Le canard enchainé* (1981) unveiled the implication of former Vichy official Maurice Papon in the transportation of French jews from France to the concentration camps[10]. In 1981, Papon, a former member of parliament and minister was forced to resign. He was eventually arrested and trialed in 1998. The plot centers on the killer's (a high official in the police) commitment to hide his implication in the deportation of jewish families to the Drancy camp. The suspect official orders the killing of Roger Thiraud, a history teacher from Drancy, and kills Thiraud's son twenty-one years later, as both father and son carry out research on the history of the camp in Drancy. In both crimes, the victims are not chosen randomly. It is their research on the history of Drancy and its infamous camp that led to the murders.

Daeninckx's novel subverts traditional perceptions of memory because it investigates untold stories, rejecting official narratives and redefining what and how history is told. In *La mémoire collective* (1997), Maurice Halbwachs points out that collective memory differs from history precisely because of the social component of memory. Memory includes what is acceptable by the community, relegating uncomfortable truths to the margins (Halbwachs, 1997, p. 113). In the same line of thinking, Pierre Nora's (1997) concepts of *lieux de mémoire* demonstrates the fragile nature of memory. Without commemorations, signs or symbols, some histories could be forgotten. Bill Schwarz concludes that:

> real memory, dies at the outset of modernity. But in its place emerge new institutions devoted to recovering what has been lost, creating new, ersatz memory forms – performed rather than lived, mediated rather than immediate – that replicate, at varying removes, what had once been vital and replete (Schwarz, 2010, p. 53).

These three thinkers are very skeptical when it comes to modernity's ability to select discourses that fit a certain narrative. Each of them questions the government's power to determine which version of the story is socially acceptable. For instance, Daeninckx's novel refers to the war in Algeria (1954-1964) and its impact on French society. Rather than looking into the atrocities that the French army committed on Algerian soil, Daeninckx focuses on the government's response to Algerian immigrants' claims in France. The first two chapters of the novel chronicle the brutal repression of the manifestation organized by Algerian immigrants in Paris, to protest authoritarian measures against them. The clash between the protestors and the police ends in a blood bath, as the narrator points out:

> Au petit matin, il ne restait plus sur les boulevards que des milliers de chaussures, d'objets, de débris divers qui témoignaient de la violence des affrontements. (…) On ne s'embarrassait pas de gestes inutiles, ni de problèmes de conscience, les corps étaient entassés pêle-mêle, sans distinction[11] (Daeninckx, 1983, p. 37).

The police reaction to the demonstration ended in a slaughter, with dozens of people killed. Yet the official statement released by the commissioner's office accounts for three casualties only. The narrator also indicates that the headlines in the newspapers published the day after the demonstration do not mention the event, and if they do, the blame is placed on the Algerians. In addition to underlining the tensions resulting from the conflict in Algeria, the treatment of the event by Daeninckx suggests a profound distrust towards state-sanctioned violence.

The absence of information on the event highlights the French government's desire to hide its responsibility, and its active role in selective memory. In effect, Daeninckx relies on a family member's testimony to narrate his version of the demonstration. In the two chapters recounting the demonstration, the writer relies on multiples nar-

[10] See: Brimo, N. (1981, mai 6).

[11] Translation: At dawn, thousands of shoes, objects, and debris could witness the extent of the clash. No one bothered with useless gestures, nor with problems of conscience, the bodies were piled up pell-mell, without distinction.

rators, Algerians, Roger Thiraud, and a police captain, before he switches to an omniscient narrator. It would be easy to imagine that all these changes suggest the writer's care for multiple perspectives and his conscious choice to offer an unbiased account of a terrible event. Indeed, Sonia Florey (2015) suggests that Daeninckx's reliance on history stems from the writer's freedom and his vision of fiction as the epitome of this freedom to adapt history into his writing. For instance, Roger Thiraud's story can be related to that of Maurice Audin, a doctoral student in mathematics at the university of Algiers, tortured and assassinated by the French military in June 1957[12]. I believe, however, that such an interpretation misses Daeninckx's ontological skepticism towards official history. Indeed, Roger Thiraud's death was not investigated for 21 years because he was linked to the Algerian National Liberation Front (FLN): "Élément européen probablement lié au movement terroriste algérien"[13] (Florey, 2015, p. 72). This information consecrates Thiraud's degradation of his basic rights by the official, sentencing the history teacher to memorial damnation, indirectly justifying the stagnation of the investigation on the son's murder. Depicting Roger Thiraud as a potential terrorist distances the police from the rest of the community, legalizing his death and his disappearance from the collective memory.

This is the point where Daeninckx's freedom in mixing fiction and history finds its limits. The writer builds his skepticism as to facts and resurrects forgotten events to prove that official narratives can be deceptive. As mentioned previously, Roger Thiraud dies a few blocks from his apartment, in the tumult of the demonstration. This suggests a plan designed to blame his murder on the Algerians and to bury the truth. Pierre Cazes, Thiraud's murderer confirms the secret character of his killing, saying that he received orders to kill the history teacher. The assassin details how Veillut, a senior official in the police and a former member of the special brigades in the army, planned Thiraud's assassination during the demonstration so that the case would be swept under the rug. Despite the abundance of historical elements, the novel builds on an individual's use of his privilege to hide the past. Similarly, Maurice Papon, the man Daeninckx denounces in his novel, benefited from his political status to hide his past. After the liberation, he did not face sanctions despite his involvement with the Vichy regime. On the contrary, he was promoted and became a member of the French parliament and a minister. After newspaper *Le canard enchainé* published his story, it took 17 years before he was indicted and trialed. Overall, *Meurtres pour mémoire* demonstrates how the quest for memory and truth can be arduous, especially when it comes to uncovering uncomfortable truths. After he solves the case, detective Cadin is transferred to another post. This clearly indicates the state's stranglehold on memory and truth.

DANIEL PENNAC'S *LA PETITE MARCHANDE DE PROSE*

1989 consecrates the triumph of capitalism and liberal democracies. Among the prominent events that shook the world that year, the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the end of communism stand out. In December, the Romanian dictator Nicolae Ceausescu was ousted by a popular revolution. The world was witnessing the expansion of neoliberalism and consumerism. This period of profound political and economic changes marked a period characterized by anxiety and depression, as social inequalities still existed and pushed intellectuals to question the future of humanity and to wonder how art could reflect a world open to diversity of all kinds.

In an article on the first novel in the Malaussène saga, *Au bonheur des ogres* (2000), Colin Davis and Elizabeth Fallaize evaluate Daniel Pennac's contribution to the development of contemporary French and crime fiction. Pennac's crime novels borrow many elements of the 'whodunit', including a "mysterious crime investigated by dogged police officers, red herrings and unexpected twists of plot, suspicion and guilt, innocence and evil" (Davis & Fallaize, 2000, p. 39). Yet, their contribution lies in their ability to break the barriers between traditional and

[12] See: Maurice Audin, un mathématicien mort sous la torture. *Pour la science* (Num. 287, 2001-09-01). https://www.pourlascience.fr/sd/histoire-sciences/maurice-audin-un-mathematicien-mort-sous-la-torture-4452.php

[13] Translation: Probably linked to the Algerian terrorist group.

mass literature. Pennac's writing spans various genres, with the aim of providing the readers with a multitude of pleasures. As Davis and Fallaize argue:

> Pennac's fiction (…) exploits the possibility that different readers may take different forms of pleasures in the same works (…) so that the desire to discover the 'whodunit' does not in any way exclude enjoyment of the aspects of the texts which have little to do with plot development (Davis & Fallaize, 2000, p. 40).

In this way, Pennac's fiction offers a variety of perspectives, of narrators, of stories, with the same purpose: to offer the reader a sense of enjoyment. His third novel in the Malaussène saga, *La petite marchande de prose* (1989) addresses the fallacy of diversity, especially when economic interests are at stake. It builds on violence and cruelty to expose how socio-economic differences affect the authorities' response to crime.

To raise and protect his clan, Benjamin Malaussène assumes the role of JLB, a best-selling writer who wants to remain anonymous. During his book tour, Malaussène is shot in the head by a psychopathic killer and falls into a coma. He is also the prime suspect in the murder of Clarence de Saint Hiver, his sister's fiancé. Pennac uses both crimes, that of Saint Hiver and the assassination attempt on Malaussène, to demonstrate how class inequalities operate. The former, a prison warder, enjoys significant attention from the judicial system and the press. His death is treated with a deployment of police force and with extreme caution: "Il y a tant de voitures de police agglutinées autour de la prison de Champrond… La bâtisse semble surgir d'une carapace de tôles où ses vieux mûrs se reflètent comme dans des eaux mortes"[14] (Pennac, 1989, p. 63). As Malaussène and his family reach the prison where his sister's marriage with Saint Hiver was supposed to take place, the whole place is surrounded by police cars. The murder of Saint Hiver makes the headlines in the newspapers. In contrast, the attempt on Malaussène's life is relegated to the margins. Only his family and friends visit him in the hospital. Even the writer seems to neglect his protagonist. In this way, Pennac explores the mental states of other characters such as Julie, Malaussène's lover, his boss, and Loussa, his colleague. The protagonist's comatose state could justify the writer's choice. While Saint Hiver's murder is being investigated, while the real JLB is offered police protection, the protagonist is abandoned by his lover and the authorities. By relegating Malaussène to the background, by trying to kill his protagonist, Pennac raises the reader's attention on economic inequalities. One could argue that Pennac's multiple intrigues allows him to avoid raising serious moral and political questions, while using crime as a narrative device.

Such an opinion negates an important characteristic of his writing. The character of Malaussène epitomizes the abject nature of neoliberalism and its constant attempt to objectify individuals. Writing rehabilitates the downtrodden through the Christ-like figure Malaussène; indeed, Malaussène's defining characteristic is his role as a scapegoat, an individual whose innocence contrasts with the anxiety of the postmodern world. As Davis points out, "Malaussène arises the hostility of the mob, or the police, because he is in fact a paragon of innocence, too pure to survive unscathed in a wicked world. He is the person who attracts to himself all the guilt for the crime of others" (Davis & Fallaize, 2000, p. 40). This attractiveness to guilt constitutes the cornerstone of the intrigue in the novel. Davis's argument discusses the importance of sacrifice and the fundamental role a scapegoat plays in a community. To cleanse society from its misdeeds, an innocent victim must be sacrificed (Davis & Fallaize, 2000, p. 41). Zabo, the protagonist's employer clearly sums his role in her company and in life in general:

> je vous ai engagé comme bouc émissaire pour que vous vous fassiez engueuler à ma place, pour que vous épongiez les emmerdes en pleurant au bon moment, pour que vous résolviez l'insoluble en ouvrant grand vos bras de martyr, pour que vous endossiez[15] (Pennac, 1989, p. 27).

[14] Translation: There are so many police cars clustered around the Champrond prison… The building seems to emerge from a shell of sheet metal where its old walls are reflected as in dead water.

[15] Translation: I hired you as a scapegoat so that you get yelled at in my place, so that you mop up the shit by crying at the right time, so that you solve the insoluble by opening wide your arms of martyrdom, so that you endorse.

Zabo adds that Malaussène's compassion is a vice, arguing that her employee lacks any ruthlessness. The young man's compassion and incredible loyalty make him the ideal target of criminals and police alike, as reflected in the plot of the novel. First, Malaussène becomes the prime suspect in Saint Hiver's murder. Second, he falls prey to Alexandre Krämer, the psychopathic killer and murderer of Saint Hiver. Third, while he is in a prolonged coma, one of the surgeons takes his organs because he believes Malaussène has no further use for them. The lead investigator, superintendent Coudrier angrily sums up Malaussène's character: "Non seulement vous êtes innocent, mais vous êtes l'innocence même"[16] (Pennac, 1989, p. 81). Good brother, colleague, loyal friend, and lover, Malaussène symbolizes the innocence of normal people caught in a rapidly changing world. He represents the silent majority whose sincere hopes for an equal future are crushed by socio-economic differences, class structures and consumerism. Like many before him, the protagonist is a puppet in the hands of capitalist priests such as Zabo or JLB. His innocence does not even afford him dignity and decency, as even his organs are harvested while he is in a coma to save other patients who may need a transplant. Despite its appearance of diversity, *La petite marchande de prose* lifts the veil on economic inequalities, reminding readers that equality is a long way away.

WALTER MOSLEY'S *BLACK BETTY*

The looming shadow of racism pervades Walter Mosley's literary career. Through the life of Easy Rawlings, the protagonist he created for his crime series, the writer chronicles black life in the streets of California in the years following the Second World War. In an interview to magazine *The armchair detective,* Mosley admits to having a special interest in migration: "rather than through space, it's through time" (Silet, 1993, p. 11). Migration through time, he adds, involves looking into the influx of black people, and those of other minorities in California; it also implies observing and chronicling the impact of such events on the lives of black people, as well as maintaining the conversation on black lives. *Black Betty* was published in 1994, a period marked by racial tensions and police brutality. In 1992, many areas in California had witnessed riots, following the acquittal of the four police officers in the Rodney King case. In 1994, the O. J. Simpson murder trial reinforced those tensions. Thus, Mosley's *Black Betty* was published at a time when the black community felt disenfranchised.

The novel plays on the contrast between the hopes of a minority for a better future and the reality of a violent present. It opens with Easy, having a nightmare, locked in a "prison of guilt, a prison of my mind" (Mosley, 1994, p. 12). Rawlings is emotionally and financially broke: his best friend, Mouse, is in jail for manslaughter; Martin Smith, his mentor is dying; and the man can barely feed his family. Despite his dire situation, he tries to think about better things: "About our new Irish president and Martin Luther King; about how the world was changing and a Black man in America had a chance to be a man for the first time in hundreds of years" (Mosley, 1994, p. 11). Here, Rawlings's mention of John F. Kennedy's election in 1961 and Martin Luther King's Civil Rights Movement echo Mosley's own hopes after the election of Bill Clinton: "The way I see Clinton is that he is reaching out for people who have been completely ignored before by the Oval Office. (…) Black people are out there, writing and doing work and trying really hard and changing the country in so many ways and people just ignore it" (Mosley, 1994, p. 15). By comparing the hopes born out of the Kennedy presidency and the fight for civil and political rights of black people to the first years of the Clinton's presidency, Mosley echoes Rawlings's daily nightmare as a black man in a racially segregated country. When Saul Lynx, a private investigator, comes to his place to hire him, the protagonist's main instinct revolves around his race, as if it determines his social status: "I didn't want him to see me with no clothes on. It was like I was still in a dream, as I was vulnerable if someone could see my skin" (Mosley, 1994, p. 12). The mention of a dream in this passage may suggest Rawlings's desire to escape his reality, as if sleeping constituted a moment when he could forget about being black and the stigma attached to his race. Yet, his financial situation and his skin color remind him that he must work every day for his survival.

[16] Translation: Not only are you innocent, but you are innocence made flesh.

The plot of the novel echoes the image of black people robbed by a racially corrupt system. Lynx hires Rawlings to find a black housekeeper, Elizabeth Eady, or Black Betty. Incidentally, the protagonist knew Betty when he was a kid in Houston. The housekeeper ran away from her place of employment after her boss and father of her children, the psychotic and wealthy white Albert Cain, was murdered. Betty inherited Cain's estate. Knowing she would be targeted, she chose to run away. Even though Rawlings was able to save her from her assassins, he could not save either her heritage, or her two adult children, or her half-brother Marlon. Roger A. Berger suggests that this bittersweet ending contends the vision of America as a society based on equality and human rights. On the contrary, he believes one of the attributes of Mosley's crime fiction lies in his ability to expose the inner corruption present in the judicial institution and the silence around the abuses suffered by black people (Berger, 1997, p. 286). Some of these include the multiple rapes Betty suffers at the hands of Albert Cain to save Marlon from jail: "He told me I better make him or he was going to send Marlon down under the jailhouse" (Mosley, 1994, p. 208). During the trial following the case, Betty's fate at the hands of Cain is not addressed. On the contrary, the prosecution "made her seem like a whore who beguiled Albert Cain" (Mosley, 1994, p. 255). Berger concludes that Betty's fate symbolizes the veil and silence covering the sufferings of minorities in America. The silence around Betty's predicament compounds the sufferings of black people, building a narrative of distrust towards the authorities.

This distrust of the authorities takes the form of a loathing of the police. As mentioned earlier, the publication of the novel coincides with the Rodney King case and the acquittal of the police officers who assaulted him, as well as the riots that followed the verdict in the trial. *Black Betty* echoes Mosley's understanding of the black people's distrust of the police. As an investigator, Rawlings has had his fair share of dealings with the police, yet this relationship is usually one-sided: "I've never been what you would call a friend to the LAPD. We were on speaking terms only because they needed my help from time to time" (Mosley, 1994, p. 136). Rawlings's subsequent conversation with detective Arno Lewis, a black police officer echoes his skepticism towards the institution. When Lewis asks him to come to the station and talk to him, he rejects his offer. Another officer, commander Styles acts as the villain in the novel. In his search for Betty, Rawlings is arrested by the police. During his subsequent encounter with commander Styles, he is beaten by the police officer and left in a cell. Styles epitomizes the corrupt and violent police officer who preys on innocent victims and uses his badge as a privilege to commit more crimes. His association with Ron Hawkes, Albert Cain's son-in-law, suggests that he was hired to eliminate any potential heir to the old man's heritage. Even though Styles was sent to jail for Hawkes's murder, his punishment does not solve the inherent brutality of the police force. On the contrary, Styles reinforces the belief that the problem lies within the force itself, and not those who serve it. Like any other black person in America, Mosley is aware of the long history of brutality and the growing distrust in the communities resulting from these brutalities. Berger's article concludes on the americanness of Mosley's crime fiction, pointing out the stylistic tone by authors like Raymond Chandler. Yet, his research does not consider the aspect of black experience that pervades Mosley's creation. *Black Betty,* among Mosley's other crime novels, is authentically black for two main reasons: first, it explores the realities of segregation; second, it unveils the continuous process of marginalization faced by African Americans.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this article was to discuss the evolution of *noir* fiction, in France and in the USA specifically. The emphasis on the 1980s and early 1990s has highlighted a period of profound political and social crises. As neoliberalism expanded on the planet, its narrative of optimism and economic growth failed to hide the contradictions of social injustice and the tensions created by racism and poverty. *Noir* was chosen as a genre still considered to lie at the margins of the literary scene because of its attachment to mass and popular culture. This genre espouses the need to deconstruct narratives of economic optimism and liberalism, reminding readers of the majority of people around the world whose sufferings are constantly ignored. Violence and crime epitomize the state's inabi-

lity to engage a real conversation on important issues. In Didier Daeninckx's *Meurtres pour mémoire,* we saw how the French political elite covered one of its members, hiding his implication in mass killings, yet promoted and protected him. The case of Maurice Papon and his political demise calls into question the role of memory, and the role that state intervention plays in the building and the writing of history. Daniel Pennac's *La petite marchande de prose* is an indictment of consumer society, relying on the Christ-like figure of Benjamin Malaussène to expose the darker side of neoliberalism. The novel reproduces class structures as if the expansion of capitalism around the world has widened the existing gap between the rich and the poor. Walter Mosley's *Black Betty* explores the struggles of black people at the mercy of an unequal system.

These three novels epitomize the two faces of contemporay politics. France's reliance on violence to subjugate public opinion and to hide the crimes caused by colonialism; the individualization of communities depicted as potential consumers in the case of Pennac's stories; racism and patriarchy aiming at maintaining economic domination on non-white communities; all these represent the history and mark of modernity. A decolonial reading of these novels enables readers to observe the intellectual wasteland of modernity, and the importance of self--determination, not only at the political level, but also at the intellectual one.

The choice of novels in this research was designed to highlight *noir*'s commitment to perpetual suspicion, its aim being never to accept any grand narrative and always to question the role crime and violence play in contemporary Western communities. Critically and epistemologically, decolonization suggests the necessity of a global conversation about the values of democracy nowadays. The current political and social crises around the world paint a darker picture of neoliberalism, one that rhymes with misery and disenfranchisement.

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Submissão/submission: 27/12/2023
Aceitação/approval: 12/07/2024

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Menye, J.-H. B. (2024). Noir in the 1980s and 1990s: Decolonizing ideologies. *Cadernos do Arquivo Municipal*, (22), 1-12.
https://doi.org/10.48751/CAM-2024-22359